

Relationship Maintenance in Married and Long-Term Relationships

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Falling in love is easy; Staying in love is the hard part. The beginning of many relationships is often filled with starry eyes, rapid heartbeats, flowing hormones, and the intense desire to like and be liked by a romantic interest. It can be such an intense and flowing experience that some might describe finding the right person to have been destined by fate, God, or the universe itself. But after marriage and several years down the road some people find that those feelings don't stay for long, and that relationships require a lot of work to build and maintain. This work aims to examine the behaviors involved with maintaining relationships, how neglect can hurt relationships, as well as give examples of how relationships can be maintained through sharing experiences and sharing media.

Relationship Maintenance Behaviors (RMBs)

Relationship maintenance behaviors are described as actions that "sustain partners' desired relational features, such as satisfaction, commitment, liking, and love" (Stafford, 2011, pp. 280). These are actions that relationships partners do to communicate to their partner that they are valued, desired, and loved; It also serves to reinforce one's connection and commitment to their partner and the relationship. Laura Stafford and Daniel Canary (1992) describe five types of relationship maintenance behaviors: positivity, openness, assurance, network, and shared tasks.

Positivity is an important quality because it affects one's worldview as well as affects how one is perceived by others; people with positive dispositions are often perceived to be good company to others, which is then reflected and reinforces positive feelings between partners. Openness is the quality and behavior of disclosing information to one's partner which is a crucial strategy in building and maintaining intimacy. Assurance, networking, and sharing tasks are all

maintenance behaviors that focus on support. Assurance provides emotional support and validation from within the relationship while networking is leveraging the shared resources that exist outside the relationship to achieve individual or relational goals. Sharing tasks is the behavior that demonstrates action and commitment to the relationship by investing the time and resources to fulfill the needs and goals of the relationship.

Relationship Maintenance in Couples

A common truism about relationships is that passion inevitably fades over time. This belief is often supported through cultural messaging that depicts love and passion as the intense and fiery period of a new relationship where partners are strongly focused on each other and reciprocate and perpetuate their desires for each other. But as the relationship matures, less time is devoted to intimacy building and redirected to careers and raising children. This redirection of time and energy to the detriment of emotional intimacy is especially prevalent among families with children. Research into the differences in relationship maintenance amongst married couples found that couples with children reported significantly less RMBs from themselves or perceived from their spouses than married couples without children (Dainton, 2008, pp. 33-45).

These findings illustrate a tension between married couples living and seeing each other as romantic partners versus living and seeing each other as the other half of a team that is tasked with raising a family, often with the importance of stability and childrearing taking priority over the romantic side of the marital relationship. The lack of performing maintenance in the relationship can result in short- and long-term negative consequences for the marriage. A breakdown of openness and disclosure in communication leads to perceived relationship dissatisfaction, especially in women; for men, lack of relationship satisfaction had an impact on willingness to be open; In the long-term, dissatisfied partners perceive the other partner to have

communication incompetence (Merrill & Afifi, 2012, pp. 499-521). These negative attitudes can be self-reinforcing when dissatisfied partners do not communicate their dissatisfaction thinking their partner will not be responsive, thus reinforcing, and intensifying dissatisfaction over time.

Maintaining Relationships Through Shared Ritual

Because relationship maintenance is necessary to maintain the health and richness of a marriage, married couples benefit when making regular maintenance a priority. Engaging in relationship maintenance goes beyond routine emotional labor, it is a ritual process. Rituals evolve from routines when they take on a symbolic meaning of their own. (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006, pp. 259-280).

Imbuing the process of relationship management with ritual takes it beyond a task; It becomes a conscious act that communicates investment, interest, commitment, and love between partners through a shared experience. These rituals can take the form of going out for coffee, a date night, a vacation, or any new or exciting shared activity where communication and quality time can be experienced. Partners who took the effort to explore new and novel experiences with their partner felt overall more personal growth and daily relationship satisfaction. (Harasymchuk, et. al., 2020, pp. 1910-1926). The ritual of taking time for new shared experiences or “touching bases” is the process of symbolic interactionism; couples are using communication to create and reinforce a shared social reality (Blumer, 1972, pp. 401-419). Building this shared world and understanding together is part of the process of building intimacy, the closeness that people feel when their feelings and understandings are mutually felt and reflected between them (Rosenbluth & Steil, 1995, pp. 163-175).

Maintaining Relationships Through Shared Media

A new area of research in interpersonal relationships is examining how digital communication effects relationship management. Media multiplexity theory argues that the stronger a relationships ties are, the more likely they will share a variety of media in different ways (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998, pp. 1101-1145). An example of how sharing media can strengthen relationships can be seen in how couples share music with each other and associate the relationship with certain songs. When people recalled specific albums or specific songs that were associated with the early parts of the relationship, it often triggered feelings of appreciation of the music and increased intimacy (Harris, et. al., 2020, pp. 163-179).

Another example of how media sharing serves to strengthen and maintain relationships is the process of using media to improve relationship quality and create interdependence between partners when social networks are unavailable to them (Gomillion, et. al., 2017, pp. 855-874). This is an adaptive strategy for couples when there their social networks are unreachable or nonexistent to create a sense of interconnectedness with others outside the relationship. This strategy uses the sharing of the experience of character and plot elements from movies and TV shows in the place of friends and family and their activities to communicate and share an understanding of the world around a couple.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how relationships are maintained using relationship maintenance behaviors and the consequences on a relationship if that relational labor is not done, especially in families with children. Creating rituals that set aside time for quality communication and sharing experiences and sharing meaningful media to reinforce positive feelings or to bond with are two potential strategies couples can use to maintain their

relationships. In conclusion the kind of love experienced in long term relationships looks very different from the passionate, erotic love that is often seen in media. For long term relationships the expression that love is an action, not a feeling appears to hold true; it requires a conscious commitment and effort for couples to decide to show love to each other daily.

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