

What is Adult Love?

by Dr. Elizabeth Carr

Valentine's Day is around the corner, and with it comes an opportunity to reflect on the nature of love. I'm talking here about grown-up love, not the hormonal infatuations we experienced in our teens, but real love between adults.

If roughly half of all marriages end in divorce and many of the people who

stayed married are not "happily" married, then loving unions are the minority and not the rule. What is the secret to having a thriving relationship? Here are a few thoughts.

First, it's not about "never having to say you're sorry." Not on this planet. In long-term relationships we make mistakes; we're periodically selfish and inconsiderate. Therefore, we must have

a mechanism for repair if a relationship is going to last.

Second, although making your relationship better "without having to talk about it" might sound appealing, the fact is that mending a troubled relationship without talking about it, at least a little bit, is unrealistic.

Third, although an occasional, "Yes



dear, whatever you say," might keep the peace in the short run, used too often this strategy can backfire, giving way to resentment. Research on committed couples has identified patterns of interaction that strengthen or weaken relationships. Here some of the highlights:

The health of any relationship can be measured in large part by answering

four simple questions.

1. *Do you know me?*
2. *Do you like what you see?*
3. *Do you have my back?*
4. *Can I say the same for you?*

This is because, in large part, what we call "love" is really a reflection of how we feel about ourselves in the presence of another person. Do we feel cherished? Do we feel fabulous? Do we adore and admire? Do we want the best for our partner and are we willing to sacrifice to see it happen? Let's look at these in detail.

In good relationships we feel like our partner really knows us. She knows our big presentation is today and that we are worried about tough questions from the guy in finance. We know this stuff about our partner because we care to ask and to keep track. Dr. John Gottman, marital researcher, refers to this as "love maps." Maintaining love maps fosters good will.

Good will is a second secret to solid relationships. When it is present everything positive flows from it. This is because each day there are hundreds of ambiguous moments that occur in our interactions with others. We must decide: What did that look, comment or action mean? When we feel good about ourselves, our partner, and our relationship, we construct benign explanations for these moments. For example, if you ask yourself: "Why didn't my partner seem to want to listen to me at dinner?" Do you tell yourself he's tired, he's selfish, I'm dull, or he's distracted? The explanations we choose are registered in our mind as truth, and then responded to accordingly. So, negativity breeds more ill will, just as positivity breeds more good will. When kindness is present, we ask questions that clear up misunderstandings. We let the little things go. We are able to recall our partner's best qualities in the moments when they can only show us their worst.

When good will is absent, it's reflected in our or our partner's criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and emotional disengagement. All of which are excellent predictors of divorce.

More often than not, the single best solution to getting a relationship back on track is to make a conscious effort to increase your level of good will. When we're hurt, we lose our ability to communicate. We resort to sarcasm, name-calling, storming out of a room, or talking about one thing when we really should address another. Saving face is often the culprit. If you think this is the case in your relationship, here are a few tips:

Don't let your pride get in the way of making things better. Own your part of the conflict and say it out loud: "When you seem disinterested in hearing about my day, it hurts my feelings. But I'm afraid to bring it up and instead I just get pissy." Then speak from the heart, "I should tell you how much I want to share my day, but I don't because I'm afraid you'll think I am too demanding or self-absorbed. I should tell you I want your attention specifically because I admire you and your opinions matter to me. But I'm hurt and annoyed so I don't feel like saying anything that nice." Finally, own what you want. Avoid veiled criticisms like "Maybe you need to get back on Ritalin" or not so veiled, "does it always have to be about you?" Instead take a risk, speak from the heart, and give your partner a chance to show you his or her best side.

Dr. Elizabeth Carr is a psychologist in Gaithersburg, www.KentlandsPsychotherapy.com, 301-356-4505.