

## Does Your Marriage Suffer from an Attention Shortage?

Years ago when I was working in a mental health center, I served on a committee that was redesigning the communications systems. In one meeting, a committee member named Susan said, “The receptionists sound frantic when they answer the phone. They need to learn to give each caller their complete attention, even when they’re multi-tasking.”

Now that’s a goal to aspire to. There’s just one problem: It’s impossible! **Either you’re multi-tasking or you’re giving your full attention, but not both.** Nonetheless, lot of us set out to achieve this impossible goal every day. At work you can get away with giving people less than your full attention. Generally speaking, your customers and colleagues are not seeking a deep emotional connection with you. But at home, it’s a different story.

Stop for a moment and think: Does it feel like there’s more tension in your marriage than there used to be? Does your partner seem to have developed a new set of annoying habits? **Or do you just have a vague sense that your relationship isn’t as juicy and satisfying as it used to be?** Consider the possibility that there’s an attention shortage in your marriage.

Pure attention nourishes us in a way that nothing else can. One Saturday, I was working on a speech I had to give the next week and I was feeling the pressure. I heard a little voice calling from the doorway of my office: “Cla-a-a-aire!” It was my step-daughter, Kristina.

“Not now, Honey,” I said, typing frantically, “I’ve really got to get this done.”

A couple of minutes later, I heard it again. “Cla-a-a- aire!”

“Look, I’ll talk to you in 5 minutes. I really need to concentrate now.”

“Cla-a-a-aire!”

Exasperated, I finally stopped typing and turned to look at her. “All right, what do you want?”

Kristina smiled at me and waved. “Hi!” Then she scampered off.

We grownups are really no different. We all need regular doses of undivided attention to make us feel close, connected, and loved. Here are three guidelines for increasing this kind of attention in your marriage.

### **Say What You See**

You might have taken communication classes where they tell you to ask open-ended questions, such as, “How did you feel when your boss cancelled the project?” Questions

are great, but sometimes you can make people feel more deeply understood by showing that you already get it.

Let her know you notice her behavior. “You seem pretty quiet today.” And then go a step further by guessing how she feels: “I wonder if you’re feeling disappointed because your boss cancelled that project.” If you’re right, she’ll get that wonderful feeling that someone else understands. If you’re wrong, just let her explain what’s really going on. The key to this technique is humility. You **wonder** if that’s how she feels. Never confuse this with **telling** her how she feels, a surefire way to sabotage your connection!

### **Be Willing to Be Surprised**

One casualty of a long-term relationship is listening with an open mind. After all, when you know someone well, you become accustomed to the themes in his conversation. And yet, he still has the capacity to surprise you, if you let him. He’s still a growing, changing being who’s learning new things and dealing with new concerns all the time.

**To really give your partner pure attention, mentally set aside your expectations about what he’s going to say and stay open.** I guarantee you that he’ll feel the difference.

### **Make the First Move**

If there’s an attention shortage in your marriage, you might be feeling like you’re running on empty and you have nothing to give. And you’re waiting for your partner to fill your tank, so that you can feel more loving. The trouble is, she’s feeling exactly the same way. You could be stuck here for a long time! **It only takes one of you to put your marriage back on the road to deeper connection.** Why not decide it’s going to be you?

Leave the multi-tasking at work. That’s what it was invented for. At home, it’s not about how much you get done; it’s about how much you connect. Give your partner what he longs for most--your complete attention--and see what happens.

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