
Claire's Tips and Tools for Happier Relationships

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Small Emotions

Last weekend, my husband said he wanted to see "**Love Actually**." What? A man requesting a romantic movie? And we'd already seen it once. How did I get this lucky? Turns out he liked the way the film is upbeat *and* realistic. But most of all, he loved the music and the powerful role it played in the movie.

In fact, Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" was the inspiration for the entire film, as director Richard Curtis tells us in the bonus features on the DVD. (Love DVD's!) He goes on to explain how he went about finding just the perfect song for each scene.

After hearing how Curtis came up with Eva Cassidy's "Songbird" for a love scene, I went back and watched it again. **I realized that I had hardly noticed that wistful, haunting song the first time around.**

Some of the other songs in the movie pack a punch. You can't miss "Both Sides Now," "All I Want for Christmas is You," and "Love is All Around." The ethereal "Songbird," on the other hand, barely makes itself felt. Yet it drives home the meaning of that scene as just as surely as any other song in the movie. You just know this woman is going to retreat from love yet one more time.

So it is with our feelings. We can't miss the big ones. The joy of getting that job we worked so hard for. The anger of being criticized. But what about the smaller, quieter ones? Like the touch of sadness when we tell a story about our day and our partner doesn't quite get it. **Or the feeling of comfort when you sit together on an ordinary evening and know that you are loved.** A lot of the time, they slip by without us even noticing.

But much of our experience of life is right there, in those small emotions. They create our relationships, moment to moment. To see what it's like when forgetting to notice has become a habit, watch one of your favorite love scenes with the sound turned off.

A lot of couples come for counseling because the sound has been turned off for quite awhile. They don't feel close. They don't feel that moment to moment connection that brought them together.

If this sounds like you, you may need some help to turn the sound on again. It may be that ignoring those small feelings has become an ingrained habit and you need some firm direction to break it. Or, maybe you're afraid. You've gotten to the point where you're only dealing in big feelings, the ones that pack a punch, and you need a therapist to create a safe zone where you can reconnect.

But in the meantime, I'll bet you can get started on your own. **Those "Songbird" feelings are still there.** They're at your breakfast table in the morning. And in the hug when you get home from work. Soft and quiet, just on the edge of your awareness. You just need to listen for them.

Your Questions

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Hi Claire,

*I feel really overwhelmed with Christmas right now and it just feels like my husband is hardly doing anything. I don't want to cause a big blow up right now, because I really don't have time for it! But I feel let down by him and it's eating away at me.*

*Any suggestions?*

*Thank you!*

*Carol*

Dear Carol,

You're not alone, that's for sure. This is the moment for feeling overwhelmed, especially for women. Here are some last-minute sanity suggestions.

1. First, do a reality check on your perceptions. You may be doing more of the work. Does that mean your husband has let you down? Maybe, maybe not. Did he agree to some tasks and then drop the ball? Or does he just have different priorities? A lot of times, men relate to Christmas much the way they do weddings-they have no idea how much work it is, or even why half of this stuff is important.
2. Speak up and ask for help. Don't criticize. Be positive. "Hey, Honey, I'm feeling overloaded. Can you help me with a few things?"
3. If you haven't been sharing the Christmas tasks equally, don't aim for mathematical equality during these last few days. That's way too high a goal. Save that for next year. For now, just take a couple of solid steps in that direction. And get some of the jobs off your plate so you can breathe.
4. Christmas preparations can take on a life of their own, again, much like weddings. A lot of people could cut out 20% of them with no perceptible decrease in fun, togetherness, or meaning. Really. Ask yourself what 20% you could do without.

Best wishes,

Claire

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