

Claire Hatch Counseling Newsletter

Tools and Tips for Happier Relationships

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In This Issue

- Valentine's Day Is Not a Test
- Cognitive Psychology-The Meat and Potatoes of Counseling
- Relationship Quick Tip-Pretend You've Just Met

Valentine's Day Is Not a Test

"I thought my first Valentine's Day with Brad would be so special," sighed Shelley to her best friend Kate. "But instead, it's like he already just takes me for granted."

"What happened? Did he forget?" asked Kate.

"No, he brought me flowers and a card and then we just had an ordinary night. I was thinking a nice dinner, maybe theatre tickets, something really romantic. Since he didn't say anything, I thought it was going to be a surprise-but not this kind of surprise!"

Valentine's Day is the perfect time for a romantic date, flowers, and "just us" time. And as Shelley is finding out, it's also the perfect time to learn some essential relationship wisdom.

When we start a relationship, we hope we've found the person who will make us feel special, loved, and appreciated in a way that no one else has. When we decide to get married, we're counting on it. If it doesn't happen the way we imagined, we can feel horribly disappointed and think our partner doesn't care.

Here is where we make our mistake. Valentine's Day is not a test. It's an opportunity to learn what makes your partner feel loved. Here are some ideas to help you make the most of this learning.

1. The gestures that make us feel special are different for each one of us.

Did your family make a big deal out of birthdays? Did they plan parties in advance, build up the excitement, and spend a lot of money? Chances are that for you this style of celebration symbolizes love. But it may not symbolize love for your partner. What if his family took a low-key approach to special occasions? He probably will as well. This doesn't mean he doesn't love you or that he "takes you for granted," as Shelley thought.

2. Love does not turn anyone into a mind reader.

I don't know where we got the idea that if our partner REALLY loves us, she will know what we want. The truth is, sometimes she will be tuned into our needs and sometimes she won't. AND THE SAME IS TRUE FOR US. It has nothing to do with whether we love each other; it has to do with being human.

3. Sometimes even YOU don't know what you really want.

Have you ever had a bad day at work and didn't know how to make yourself feel better? You felt restless and wondered, Do I want a workout, a movie, or a chat with a friend? We've all been there. Most of us don't automatically know what makes us feel nurtured. We learn through a process of self-discovery. And until we do, we can't communicate it to someone else.

4. You need to be the kind of partner you want to have.

Question for Shelley: Why is it your boyfriend's job to make you feel special on Valentine's Day? What are you doing to make him feel special?

Watch out for the "you first" mentality. It goes something like this: I don't feel special and so I can't come up with any romantic energy to make you feel special until you make the first move. A stalemate is inevitable.

Don't turn Valentine's Day into a test. Look at it as a day to learn more about what makes each of you feel loved. If you do, you really will have a special Valentine's Day.

Cognitive Psychology-The Meat and Potatoes of Counseling

First, we were told pasta was diet food. Then cutting carbs was in. Now, a lot of people are returning to a balanced diet. My doctor told me: "Now I'm telling my patients to eat the way my grandparents did. Meat, vegetable, and potatoes. We're going back to the tried and true."

Cognitive psychology is the meat and potatoes of mental health. You may have noticed that my profession has a love affair with the new and exotic. The number of therapy models has increased 600% since the 1960's. While I'm all for innovation and progress, I can't help noticing that if you look closely, **you'll find cognitive principles at work in almost every counseling model that's effective.**

Why? For one thing, it works. It's probably the most widely researched and proven method of counseling. It's easy to understand. And you don't have to subscribe to any elaborate theories for it to work.

In essence, cognitive therapy is a reality check on your thoughts. Your thoughts have a huge impact on how you feel and how you handle your life. So, you want them to be as grounded in reality as possible.

How can cognitive psychology help your relationship? Consider this scene.

Linda and Peter are driving home from a date. They've had a great time. But on the way home, Peter is very quiet.

Linda thinks, "He must be annoyed at me. Maybe he didn't have a good time. He probably didn't like it when I disagreed with him about the election. I guess we won't be going to the mountains this weekend. He probably won't want to see me anymore."

By the time Peter starts chatting again, Linda's in a funk, which then gets Peter upset. And they still don't know whether there's anything to get upset about!

Chances are this scenario seems a) very familiar, and b) kind of silly. That's because we all react this way from time to time. And, it's a lot easier to see it in other people than in ourselves.

Cognitive tools can help Linda see that it's her patterns of thinking that are upsetting her, not anything Peter is doing. First, she's **mind-reading**. She doesn't really know what Peter is thinking. Secondly, she's **catastrophizing**, that is predicting a disaster scenario without any evidence it will occur. Cognitive counseling could teach Linda to catch her thoughts and give them a reality test. Then she could ask Peter what he's thinking. And a great date wouldn't have to come to a bad end.

Relationship Quick Tip-Pretend You've Just Met

After you've lived with someone for a few years, you feel like you know her inside and out. You pretty much know what's important to her and what her opinion is on most subjects. Right? Wrong!

Your partner is changing and growing every minute just like you are. She'll grow AWAY from you if you treat her like a known quantity.

Every so often, pretend it's your first date. What are you curious about? What questions would you ask her? Go ahead and ask them. The answers may surprise you.

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