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## Claire's Tips and Tools for Happier Relationships

November 2004

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Got a Minute? Improve Your Relationship.

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Janet and Nate were on the verge of divorce when they first came to see me. Four months later, they were feeling closer to each other than they ever had before. **What turned their marriage around?** According to Janet and Nate, the most important change they made was checking in with each other every night about their day.

"We used to let the evening get eaten up with 'work,' says Nate. "Did you send in that insurance form? Did you see my email about the taxes? What did the dentist say at Kaylie's check up?"

"Yeah," adds Janet, "Now, we make sure we spend some time talking about what was important to each of us during the day. What was interesting? Did one of us have something difficult to deal with? Last night, Nate talked about upping the weight in his lifting routine. That might not seem like a big deal, but it was important to him."

As Janet and Nate have seen, small moments of connection can have a big impact. **Something as simple as a conversation about your day really can make you feel happier about your partner.** But as with so many relationship skills, simple doesn't necessarily mean easy. If you've got the habit of *not* connecting, you know how it takes on a life of its own. Here are some ideas for turning those 'misses' into meaningful connections.

### You Do Have Time

Does this sound familiar? "We just don't have time to sit down and talk the way we used to." Well, you probably don't. But chances are you're underestimating the effect just a little bit of time would make. In cognitive therapy, there's a pattern of thinking called "Magnification." It means that you see a problem or a task as being much bigger than it really is. Busy professionals can fall prey to this. They're stretched so thin that the thought of adding one more thing to their plate can seem overwhelming. The solution? **Do a reality check on how much time that task will actually take.** For example:

Tell each other what was most important about your day: 15 minutes.

Give appreciation for taking care of the shopping, dinner, the dishes: 10 seconds.

Call your partner at work to ask how that meeting went: 5 minutes.

Look your partner in the eye and kiss him: Time optional!

## **The Drive to Optimize**

If you sit down and talk, you might not get the dishes done. Or that phone call made. Or that email answered. Naturally, you want to make the most of every minute, so your household and your life run smoothly. But I'm afraid that when you say hello to a serious relationship, you say goodbye to optimal efficiency.

"I used to get a huge amount accomplished in the evenings when I was single," said Tara. "Why, I could go to the gym, finish some work, get the laundry done, and make three phone calls. There was no one's day to hear about, no one's moods to tune into, no one who needed comforting after a tough day."

And no arguments to resolve. As we all know, they really eat up time!

**The truth is, when you enter a relationship, life gets messier.** That's just the way it goes. You lose some control over your time. This can be a big adjustment for highly productive professionals. If you've been resisting this fact of life, try embracing it and see what happens. Leave the toys on the floor so you can chat awhile longer with your partner. It will be uncomfortable at first, but I think you'll find it's worth it.

## **I Thought I Knew You!**

When you were first dating, you were driven to find out everything about this fascinating person. Right? Your conversations lasted well into the night. You just couldn't learn enough about her. **Then, at some point, you 'got the picture' and your curiosity started to taper off.** You stopped paying such close attention.

But the truth is, you will never 'get the picture.' Your partner is a living, breathing, growing, *changing* being. There is still plenty to learn about her. If you doubt it, try this experiment. Go out for dinner together with people you haven't seen for awhile or don't know that well. When the others start asking your partner about herself, what do you think will happen? Ten to one she'll say something you've never heard before.

Of course, you don't have to wait for an evening out. You can just stop, pay a little more attention, and listen a little harder. Look at your partner with fresh eyes. I guarantee you, your partner will feel the difference.

## **Give It a Try**

"I think what happens is that even if you only spend a few minutes, the good feelings spread through the day," says Nate. "And then you want spend more time together. And when you really want to be together, you make the time. That's when you really feel a change in your relationship."

## **Your Questions**

I get emails about communication and relationship problems from around the country-- from all over the world, actually. Starting this month, I'll answer one question in this newsletter. If you'd like me to write a short article addressing *your* concern, just reply to this email and tell me what's on your mind. And don't worry; I would never use your real name unless you specified that you wanted me to.

## Here's the question for November:

*Hi Claire,*

*My fiancé and I are starting to talk about marriage. When would be a good time to do some pre-marital counseling?*

*Thanks!  
Jill B.*

Dear Jill,

I applaud you for thinking about this early on. Here are some good times to consider counseling:

1. The two of you are having trouble moving forward and making a commitment.
2. One of you feels ready for marriage and the other is not.
3. You feel like, "This is the perfect person for me. If only he could change this one little thing."
4. You have become engaged and want marriage preparation to keep small problems from becoming big problems.
5. You are engaged and you find yourself in "the emotional cocktail." The prospect of marriage has triggered more feelings than you can sort out on your own.
6. And of course, counseling is always a good idea if you're having second thoughts. Feelings of doubt can be very quiet and easily lost in the wedding momentum. At any point along the way, if either of you have questions about whether you're ready for marriage, run--do not walk--to the phone, and give me a call.

I wish you the best,

Claire

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**Claire Hatch, LICSW, is a licensed counselor who specializes in helping people turn conflict into closeness. She works with clients in her Seattle area office and by phone around the world. Claire gives presentations on settling conflicts, taming stress, and balancing work and family.** Based in Kirkland, Washington, Claire has been featured in Glamour and Seattle Bride magazines, and writes the "Relationship Guide" column for [www.byrecommendationonly.com](http://www.byrecommendationonly.com). A stimulating and entertaining presenter, she gives seminars and speeches on such topics as how to "Stop Arguments Before They Start." Visit [www.clairehatch.com](http://www.clairehatch.com) or contact Claire by email at: [claire@clairehatch.com](mailto:claire@clairehatch.com)

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