

GETTING CLOSER AS A COUPLE

You can use these 10 words as reminders of ways to keep your marriage fresh, strong and God-centered.

by Victor M. Parachin

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Judi and Robert, married 10 years, are both busy professionals. They log long hours on their jobs, and their one day off each week is spent catching up on household chores—laundry, yard work, cleaning, grocery shopping and paying the bills. They have very little time to be together. Over the decade of their marriage, Judi and Robert have become strangers to each other, even though they share the same roof.

Nancy and Ron have been married 15 years. Both work full -time and are very involved with their three children, spending most evenings and weekends transporting children to their various activities—music lessons, sports practices, ballet. During the 15years of their marriage, the closeness they first enjoyed seems to have evaporated.

Sound familiar? Judi and Robert, Nancy and Ron share something in common with many other couples. For various reasons they have drifted apart. The vitality and sparkle that used to characterize their relationship is gone. They didn't plan it. It just happened—subtly, slowly, silently.

However, there is good news. Christian couples can break through emotional distance to revive their relationships.

Here are 10 important words for getting closer as a couple. You may want to write them out and keep them where you will see them every day as a reminder to practice the ideas behind each.

Faith

Couples who worship, pray, read Scripture and participate in church activities together generally have stronger, happier marriages. Their faith in Christ becomes the strongest tie that binds them together.

Ricardo Montalban, the actor well-known for his role as Mr. Roarke, the white-suited host of "Fantasy Island," is a committed Christian. He has been married to Georgiana for several decades. He credits their deep faith in Jesus Christ for the satisfaction and success of their marriage: "If you stick to your principles, religion and convictions, you'll be rewarded," he said. "You need many different kinds of glue in a marriage—love, humor, respect—and belief in God. That is the strongest of all. It's kept us together."

In her book *501 Practical Ways to Love your Husband & Kids* (CPH, 1996), Jennifer Baker suggests, “Start each day, close each evening or conclude a meal time with a brief devotion just for you and your husband.”

Listen

A common concern many couples express is that their partner “doesn’t listen” or “refuses to understand,” or they react with harsh words. “He who speaks rashly will come to ruin,” notes the writer of Proverbs (13:3).

A simple way to defuse a pattern of miscommunication is to practice *receptive listening*. That means dropping all defenses in order to learn what the other person is really saying and feeling. Opera tenor Jan Peerce, after being married nearly 50 years, said: “My wife and I made a pact a long time ago, and we’ve kept it no matter how angry we’ve grown with each other. When one yells, the other listens—because when two people yell, there is no communication, just noise and bad vibrations.”

Remorse

The ability to feel remorse—that sense of guilt over a wrong one has done—is essential for any marriage to succeed and thrive. Remorse is a positive force that drives a spouse to admit a wrong, extend an apology and seek forgiveness. A spouse who feels remorse demonstrates respect and love for his or her partner. Remorse is a powerful healing agent within a marriage.

“It’s hard to say why an unexpected bowl of popcorn, placed at your end of the couch, can erase the leftover tension from a quarrel, but it can,” notes Philadelphia clinical psychologist Judith Sills. “Maybe because it says, I’m sorry I was in a bad mood.”

Forgive

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col. 3:13). The inspired St. Paul knew that whenever human beings live together they can cause each other pain, intentionally and unintentionally.

The path that leads to healing from lingering hurts is forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean whitewashing what has happened. Forgiveness means letting go of the hurt, moving on in the relationship, learning from the experience and using the information to build a stronger marriage.

A good example is the following letter, written by Jennifer to her husband after she was offended by insensitive comments he made during a heated argument a week earlier:

“Michael, I was very hurt by what was spoken, but, at the same time, I can see you’re human and can make mistakes. I forgive you. I love you and our life together. I want us to understand each other even better and

grow from this. When you or I are unhappy with something in our relationship, we need to speak *before* the feelings erupt into a full-scale argument. Let's make our marriage even better than it was. I love you, Jennifer."

Share

Take some time to look back together at the events that make up your life as a couple. The sharing of these memories is effective in rekindling feelings of warmth, affection and love. "God gave us memories that we might have roses in December," wrote James M. Barrie.

Sharing memories can be done verbally: "Remember the year we lived in Washington, D.C., and the power went off for two days? We snuggled and slept in front of the fireplace." The sharing of memories can also be visual. Turn off the television, get out your family photo albums, savor and treasure the memories recorded in them.

Initiate

Taking the initiative for doing things together seems to be forgotten and neglected the longer a couple is married. "It's easier to wait for our spouse to suggest going out for a date, what we ought to do on vacation, having friends over for dinner, taking a stroll around the block," observes writer Carole Mayhall. "And so we settle into a comfortable (if boring) rut and wonder where the excitement went."

"Ask your husband to describe his idea of the perfect day or evening for two" is an interesting suggestion to wives from Jennifer Baker. "Get his ideas of what he would enjoy and plan accordingly." Then take the initiative—act on those ideas.

Time

A couple cannot grow in love without spending time together. Bill and Kristin, a Los Angeles professional couple, have very hectic schedules. Yet, every month they compare calendars, choose a day and mark it in large letters: "NOTHING." They take off from work on these "nothing" days, pass up all social events and spend the day together enjoying each other. "The day is completely unstructured," Bill explains. "Once we rented two movies, returned to our house, cuddled up on the couch and enjoyed a double feature together. Another time we simply went for a walk in the park and enjoyed a picnic lunch. The point isn't *what* we do but simply that we are *spending time together*."

Jennifer Baker, in her book *501 Practical Ways to Love your Husband & Kids*, urges married couples, "Try to go to bed together as often as possible. Share pleasant events of the day. Allow time for snuggling and cuddling before you're too exhausted to care. Pray together and give God the burdens of the day and ask Him to bless your rest."

Praise

Many spouses say they feel underappreciated and even rejected by their partners. Couples who are close and remain that way practice praising early and often. They know the importance of being a cheerleader and of providing the applause of appreciation.

“We have never met a person who was suffering from too much praise, acceptance or support from those around him,” note Kevin and Marilyn Ryan in their book *Making a Marriage*.

“We have both been surprised that simple compliments have meant so much to the other. We thought surely the other person knew how much we valued this or that aspect of him or her. We have come to believe that all of us are struggling in an impersonal world and are plagued by self-doubt. We need to be told about our strengths and the things we do well. And we need to be told early and often.”

Talk

Couples who have never drifted apart are inevitably those who have made it a habit to talk openly about issues. Even though such a conversation could result in some pain, they do not avoid or evade issues. It is wiser to express and explore feelings early, *before* they become more intense.

David has been married 50 years to the same woman. Their family now includes two children, nine grandchildren and a great-grandchild. Looking back over his satisfying marriage, he says: “As a husband who’s proud of 50 years of marriage and hopes for many more, I believe that what contributes to our success is that we always talk about minor problems and differences that arise between us before they fester and get bigger. We’re considerate of each other and give in once in a while, even when giving in isn’t what we’d like to do.”

Another important aspect of talking openly is maintaining a sense of humor. “Humor is the sunshine of the mind,” noted Edward George Bulwer-Lytton. Maintaining a sense of humor can take the sting out of disappointment and the bite out of an argument. Healthy couples know there is wisdom in simply laughing away some issues and problems.

Grow

Couples who remain close are constantly growing in their knowledge of the world and in their Christian faith. A good example is Jerri, a 38-year-old teacher in Chicago who has been married 15 years. “My husband and I are always taking refresher courses of one kind or another. They lead to many stimulating conversations and they help keep us from getting stale and bored with each other. We’re both eager to grow intellectually, emotionally and, most of all, spiritually.

“We try to participate together in some kind of marriage enrichment program once every year. Also, I’ve made it a point to read one magazine article or one book chapter about

marriage from a Christian professional each month,” she adds. “I gain many new insights and try to apply them to our relationship, always with positive results.”

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