

the Real Love guide

10 WAYS TO HELP NURTURE LOVE IN YOUR LIFE

Spirituality & Health

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CONTENTS

3 **WHAT IS REAL LOVE?**
An exploration on the true meaning of love.
BY EVE HOGAN

4 **WHEN UNCONDITIONAL LOVE IS CONDITIONAL**
We can love someone unconditionally from a distance while having conditions for how they treat us.
BY EVE HOGAN

5 **CULTIVATING INTIMACY THROUGH MEDITATION**
Intimacy is a practice of presence: showing up and paying attention, whether it is to your best friend, the moss on the trees, or to the heaviness in your heart.
BY JULIE PETERS

6 **5 WAYS TO LET LOVE IN**
Experience new love and intimacy with these practices and mantras.
BY KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER

7 **70 AFFIRMATIONS FOR LOVING YOUR PARTNER NO MATTER WHAT**
Saying these affirmations reminds us to take responsibility for our thoughts, feelings and actions and sets the proper intention to have a lasting, harmonious relationship.
BY BESS O'CONNOR

9 **HOW CAN I LOVE YOU WHEN YOU DON'T LOVE YOURSELF?**
5 tips on loving people who have low self-esteem
BY ANNELI RUFUS

10 **STARTING AGAIN—WITH YOU**
When two people love each other, but haven't been able to sustain a harmonious relationship, it doesn't necessarily mean that they need to find a different partner.
BY EVE HOGAN

11 **5 SIMPLE WAYS TO BREATHE LIFE INTO A RELATIONSHIP**
You can rekindle the connection with a little mindful inquiry.
BY EVE HOGAN

12 **THE WISDOM OF DISCONNECTION**
Relating to others is a form of play—a willingness to flow from connection and disconnection and back again.
BY JULIE PETERS

13 **HOW TO NURTURE YOUR MOST IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIP**
If you can clearly communicate your needs to yourself, you will find it easier to communicate your needs in any relationship.
BY WILL DONNELLY

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Spirituality & Health



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Gratitude is perhaps the highest expression of honor and humility, both beautiful words to throw into the love mix.

What is *Real Love?*

AN EXPLORATION ON THE TRUE MEANING OF LOVE.

I RECENTLY READ AN ARTICLE about the multitude of celebrity break ups that have happened so far in 2015. The article reported, "Couples were breaking up left and right—leaving many to wonder if love is even a real thing anymore." It then went on to site all the couples that had split.

Since love certainly appears to be a "recyclable," I decided to take a deeper look at love to see what is going on, and lo and behold I discovered the real problem. We don't know what it is! We are all seeking it, giving it, taking it, wanting it, and some are dying over losing it or not finding it, but we can't agree on defining it.

The dictionary had definitions that spurred my semi-sarcastic reactions in italics:

"Feeling tender affection," *(Tender affection doesn't sound strong enough, I have tender affection for my next door neighbor!)*

"Feeling desire," *(I'm CERTAIN that isn't love! Can't we feel desire even when no one is the focal point?)*

"Liking something very much" *(Hmmm....isn't that just like?)*

"Having sex with somebody" *(Really? In the definition of love? That changes everything—and not for the better!)*

Feeling quite unsatisfied with the dictionary definitions, I turned to the Internet. There I found that apparently, what love is depends on who you ask and, perhaps, who you love. A physicist says it is chemistry, or "a powerful neurological condition like hunger or thirst." A psychotherapist said the Greeks identified seven different types of love, each different depending on who you love. (Stoge: family, Philia: friends, Eros: sexual, Agape: Divine love, Ludas: playful, Pragma: long lasting love, and Philautia: love of self.) A philosopher said it is a passionate commitment. *(But I'm certain I've loved and have been loved without any commitment.)* A romance novelist says, "Love is everything, it is what drives stories." (But I think unrequited love is what seems to drive stories, myself.) A theologian says, "God is Love." And while I tend to agree, don't get me started on trying to define God.

My favorite answer came from Rabbi Shais Taub who said the concept of love is not a concept but an action. "The Hebrew word for love, *ahavah*, reveals this true definition of love, for the word ahavah is built upon the root consonants *h v*, which means "to give. In order for love to be real love, it has to be expressed as an action. If you love your beloved, then you must show it. By the same token, if you are loved, that will show, too. You will recognize it by the way you are treated."

I appreciate this call to action. Saying you love someone, but speaking to them and treating them without love, discounts the proclamation. Simply put, actions speak louder than words. However, I also question whether love *must* be acted on. There are people I have loved with whom acting upon that love could have been harmful. Perhaps love sometimes requires inaction as the action.

So, since none of this gave me greater clarity, I decided to go out on a limb and see if I had a definition of my own.

Here it is: *Love is the ability to meet someone (or something) in the present moment in full acceptance, respect, and gratitude.*

When we "meet in the present moment," our vision is not tainted by the past or clouded by the future. Rather we see what is before us, right now.

"Full acceptance" means that the person, as they are, is what we love: not our expectations, or hopes for change. To be fully seen and accepted is truly to feel loved. To fully accept is an act of love.

Respect is important because, out of respect comes our action or our inaction. Respect implies that we will be thoughtful, considerate and aim not to harm. Respect is not manipulative or hurtful and calls for an alignment of our actions with our values.

Gratitude is perhaps the highest expression of honor and humility, both beautiful words to throw into the love mix.

I tested my definition against the Greeks and found this still applied no matter who you are loving: strangers, friends, family, lover, spouse, God or Self.

This brings us full circle. In order to know whether love is real, we need to know what real love is. What's your definition?

— EVE HOGAN

When Unconditional Love *Is Conditional*

WE CAN LOVE SOMEONE UNCONDITIONALLY FROM A DISTANCE WHILE HAVING CONDITIONS FOR HOW THEY TREAT US.



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I WAS ONCE WORKING with a group of teenagers discussing "integrity agreements," which I described as "either spoken or unspoken agreements not to hurt each other." These integrity agreements are the fabric of our society. This belief, that we won't harm each other, is what allows us to walk down the street without worrying about getting shot or intentionally run over. I discussed with the teens how every time we break integrity agreements with each other—every time we cheat, lie, abuse, or harm—we weaken the agreement and create unstable relationships.

Their families might keep taking them back after a breach of the agreement, I explained, but there could come a point in time in which the integrity of the relationship has been so severely damaged that it cannot be repaired. Some of them, from experience, knew exactly what I was talking about. But one of the teens said, "But my mom and dad love me *unconditionally*. They have to take me back."

As we have witnessed in countless homes and families, this is not actually true. Parents don't welcome their kids home no matter what. Kids don't have to embrace their parents no matter what, and spouses don't stay married *no matter what*.

It is my observation that unconditional love may still have conditions.

"Unconditional love" is aspired toward in the realm of personal and spiritual growth as the highest form of love. But what is it exactly? How do you do it? And is it really possible? Is it maintained regardless of integrity?

In some circles, unconditional love essentially means love *no matter what*. We tend to think that unconditional love is the love of family members and of married couples. In fact, when we say "I do," we are essentially saying, "I'll love you no matter what—for better and for worse, in good times and bad."

My personal philosophy is that there is a difference between unconditionally loving someone and unconditionally *living with them*, staying in close proximity to them, or remaining in a relationship with them.

We can love someone unconditionally from a distance while having conditions for how they treat us. We can pray for them, wish them well, and want the best for them while maintaining boundaries about how we are treated. Unconditional love in its purest sense doesn't mean allowing someone to repeatedly abuse or harm us, no matter what.

I've often thought that if marriage vows really reflected the truth of how people were going to behave, they would say, "I'll love you forever in my heart of hearts, but I'll only stay married to you until you cheat, lie, or become irresponsible with time or money."

So my invitation is to contemplate this concept—and feel free to share. What does unconditional love mean to you? Can you love someone and still choose not to be around them? Is it more "spiritual" to put up with behavior in the name of love, or to love yourself enough to draw boundaries?

Your thoughts?

— EVE HOGAN

Cultivating Intimacy through *Meditation*

INTIMACY IS A PRACTICE OF PRESENCE: SHOWING UP AND PAYING ATTENTION, WHETHER IT IS TO YOUR BEST FRIEND, THE MOSS ON THE TREES, OR TO THE HEAVINESS IN YOUR HEART.

THERE ARE THREE MAJOR ISSUES facing our world today, according to Buddhist teacher Michael Stone: Climate change, economic inequality, and a crisis of intimacy. Further, it may be our intimacy issues that are preventing deep engagement with our communities and the environment. So how can we learn intimacy?

Intimacy is, at its essence, a practice of presence: showing up and paying attention, whether it is to your best friend, the moss on the trees, or to the heaviness in your heart. We've learned tactics for distraction and disassociation, exacerbated by our beeping phones and the TV in the background, not to mention our learned cultural terror of awkward silences.

In order to avoid these silences (and perhaps to head off the vulnerability of intimacy), we tend to insert ourselves into our conversations: when a friend tells us they've had a bad day, we jump in to relate it to our own lives, or to try to fix the problem so they'll stop feeling what they are expressing. None of that is really listening. Listening requires that we shut up some of the time, and simply hold space for the other person.

Matthew Remski recently wrote a piece on meditation as a



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As we discover the ways we **avoid connecting** internally, we start to see the ways we do that with other people.

form of conversation between two of your selves: your conscious self and your feeling self. Your feeling self is that which experiences, that which holds sensation and emotion in the body. Your conscious self is the self that has language, that understands the world through narratives.

When we meditate by focusing on the breath, for example, we are trying to call the conscious self into the presence of the feeling self. As we allow them to come into contact, old habits may arise: we tell that old grief it has no right to sit in our hearts, or reprimand the mind for obsessing about what the boss said. The work is to keep these two selves in each others' presence, allowing them both the space to express whatever is going on. When the mind starts wandering away, chattering into worry or judgment, we can call it back to the body by taking a breath.

This way, we can cultivate intimacy between our selves. Staying in the presence of what we are feeling and becoming aware of what we are thinking can shine a light on the relationship patterns that we enact every day inside our own skins. As we discover the ways we avoid connecting internally, we start to see the ways we do that with other people. As we learn compassion and kindness for our own faults, shame, joy, and madness, we can stay open to those of our lovers and our families.

Some of us are great about offering compassion and kindness to others, but we are not so good at extending the same to ourselves. We can, however, allow these practices to mirror each other: we can call up the tools we've learned to use in the presence of our best friends and apply them alone in the quiet.

Remski writes: It's helpful to remember that the best conversations end in radiant aporia—an impasse of language and thought brought about through empathy and interconnection. When conversants exhaust their content and fall silent in an awareness of the world that conjoins them, they enact socially what meditators have always sought in private yogic experience.

The trick is to get the two selves to sit next to each other. Then, get off your meditation cushion and sit next to the one you love.

— JULIE PETERS

5 Ways to *Let Love In*

EXPERIENCE NEW LOVE AND INTIMACY WITH THESE PRACTICES AND MANTRAS.

"I'M NO LONGER AFRAID of being hurt and heartbroken," a friend recently told me. She'd been through a rough time: a nasty separation from her husband, a shaky reunion, and then a divorce. Now dating a wonderful new man, she says, "I am opening my heart again and it's been an incredible feeling."

Whether you have been through a difficult breakup, a dissolving marriage or even the death of a partner, you have endured the searing pain of lost love. If you're ready—or want to be ready—to have a new experience of love and intimacy, here are some practices that can help guide you on that journey.

1 RELEASE THE PAST

Use the mantra *Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu.*

Practitioners of Jivamukti yoga are very familiar with this mantra, which means, "May all beings everywhere be happy and free, and may the thoughts, words, and actions of my own life contribute in some way to that happiness and to that freedom for all."

Desiring happiness and freedom for other people—yes, even your jerk of an ex—helps you have more empathy and live in a harmonious way.

2 START EACH DAY RIGHT

Breakfast is important, but so is this nourishing quote from Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius. "When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive—to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love."

Begin each day by celebrating your unique human capacity for love. Breathe in deeply and focus on the sensation of expansion.

3 ATTRACT LOVE

Try this mantra, written by life coach Erika Dolnakcova. "I am deserving of a loving, supportive and respectful relationship and I am now divinely guided every day to meet the person I want to share my life with." Say it daily, out loud.

The idea that "I deserve good things" can be hard for some people to feel comfortable with, but think of this advice, from the writings of Marianne Williamson. "We ask ourselves, 'who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God."

You could also try a mudra, a symbolic hand gesture, while meditating. Sabrina Mesko's book, Healing Mudras, offers this one for attracting love: Hold up both hands and extend your fingers up. Bend the middle finger and ring finger down and use your thumbs to press them into your palms. With your elbows raised, hold the posture for three minutes, twice a day, while picturing yourself surrounded by a field of love and light.

"We ask ourselves, 'who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God."

4 RECEIVE LOVE

Now it's time to let go of any fears or behaviors that may be holding the people around you at arm's length. Amanda Owen, author of two books on the power of receiving love, has referred to three practices:

1. *Accept.* Take and enjoy what people offer you, whether it's a compliment, an offer of help or a gift.
2. *Be authentic.* You don't have to be "together" all the time, so let other people know what is actually happening in your life.
3. *Have gratitude.* Try keeping a gratitude journal so you can look for ways to appreciate what life is offering you. And don't skimp on the thank you notes or emails.

5 MAKE IT LAST

Affirmations "verbally affirm our dreams and ambitions," writes Dr. Carmen Harra, a psychologist who often works with couples. Harra says that affirmations can even help rewire our brains for happiness. So if you're in a relationship, use an affirmation such as "My relationship is becoming stronger, deeper, and more stable each day. Say it out loud three times a day. A few hugs and smooches probably couldn't hurt, either.

— KATHRYN DRURY WAGNER



70 Affirmations for Loving your Partner No Matter What

SAYING THESE AFFIRMATIONS REMINDS US TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR THOUGHTS, FEELINGS AND ACTIONS AND SETS THE PROPER INTENTION TO HAVE A LASTING, HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP.

NO MATTER HOW INTENSE love starts, after a certain amount of time, the "honeymoon" wears off. Thankfully, that energy can transform into other things—a deeper love, appreciation and respect, more understanding and less conflict, and more oneness and less separateness.

We're not taught classes on character qualities and ideals, love and relationships, or even conscious communication in our school system, so it's no wonder why we fail so miserably at relationships and marriage.

There are, however, so many great ways we can sustain a loving relationship—one of them being daily affirmations. Saying these affirmations reminds us to take responsibility for our thoughts, feelings and actions and sets the proper intention to have a lasting, harmonious relationship.

In reality, love is unconditional—we are the ones that put conditions in the way of experiencing full, heart-centered union with our loved one.

— BESS O'CONNOR

Love Affirmations

1. The grass is never greener on the other side; it's greener where I water and tend to it.
2. My partner is a reflection of me.
3. I look inward for all the answers to my problems.
4. I accept responsibility for my actions and make right my wrongs.
5. I am forgiving.
6. I will never give up on love.
7. Energy spent loving is never a loss.
8. The light in me sees the light in you.
9. My love is unconditional.
10. Separateness is an illusion; my partner and I are one.
11. *I am worthy of love and deserve to be loved unconditionally.*
12. I treat my partner the way I want to be treated.
13. My partner is loving, generous and kind.
14. I attract exactly what I need in my relationship.
15. There is nothing my partner can do to make me stop loving him/her.
16. I express love in many forms.
17. I'm open to love in all forms.
18. I am open, free and joyful.
19. My partner loves and appreciates me.
20. I feel safe and protected by my partner.
21. look at my partner through my eyes via my heart.
22. I have a twinkle in my eye for my partner.
23. I focus on the good in everything.
24. I express gratitude daily, thanking my partner for his/her gifts she/he brings to the world (and me).
25. I listen with an open heart and a loving ear.

26. I put my best foot forward in my relationship.

27. No one is perfect, including me.

28. If someone pushes my buttons, they are still MY buttons – personal issues I need to tend to.

29. I am understanding.

30. *My goal is always to create harmony and clarity.*

31. I listen to understand and not to "win."

32. No one ever wins in an argument.

33. I communicate in peace and with compassion.

34. I remain in balance with my emotions.

35. I practice patience with grace and ease.

36. I am flexible.

37. I create the foundation on which my relationship is built.

38. I do the best I can.

39. I'm either destroying or building in every moment.

40. I am honest, trustworthy and truthful.

41. I am trusting in my relationship.

42. I accept my partner's flaws and always leave room for growth.

43. I support my partner's dreams.

44. With every action, I am being an example of what I want to see in my partner.

45. I avoid blaming and pointing the finger.

46. I speak only kind words about my partner.

47. I never complain.

48. I state my needs clearly and honestly.

49. I speak my truth without blame or shame.

50. I always leave the door open for affection.

51. I never give my partner the cold shoulder and continually hold space for change.

52. *I set the space and tone for love to express itself.*

53. Loving my partner is loving myself.

54. I am a warrior for love.

55. I create a sanctuary in my home that is always inviting to my partner.

56. I stand firm and grounded in love.

57. *Love emanates from my very being and affects all around me.*

58. No one can hurt me, for I am the only one that can hurt myself.

59. I think positively of my partner.

60. I encourage my partner to reach for the stars.

61. I let go of all grudges and resentment.

62. I don't bring up old wounds (unless to heal them).

63. My energy transforms conflict into oneness and unity.

64. I always leave room for improvement.

65. *Through intention, I achieve my ideal relationship.*

66. I cannot change anyone else, I can only change myself.

67. With my support and love, my partner can be the best version of him/herself.

68. *Happiness starts within.*

69. I am content and joyful alone and my partner only adds on to the good feeling that's already there.

70. I T.H.I.N.K. before I speak:
T- is it true?
H- is it honest?
I- is it inspiring?
N- is it necessary?
K- is it kind?

How Can I Love You When You *Don't Love Yourself?*

5 TIPS ON LOVING PEOPLE WHO HAVE LOW SELF-ESTEEM

PERSON A TELLS PERSON B: "You're beautiful."

"I am not," Person B retorts.

"I love you," Person A sighs.

"Why?" wails Person B.

Loving people who have low self-esteem means constantly wrestling out of their hands the virtual baseball bats with which they're beating themselves over the head. Loving such people means engaging in endless debates, striving to make them agree with you ... about *them*.

Loving such people is draining, frustrating and infuriating. It's also an act of major forebearance and faith. Here are some tips to make your mission easier.

- **Offer small, credible compliments.** People with low self-esteem rebuff praise not because we're modest but because we blatantly disbelieve it. The grander a compliment, the more we'll assume you're trying to trick, mock or manipulate us. Praise small, plausible things we'd be hard-pressed to dispute or dismiss. "You're kind to animals" or "You're fun to watch movies with" are far easier for us to accept than "You're gorgeous" or "You're brilliant." Once we accept these morsels, we'll treasure them like a horde of little jewels.
- **Be a reality-check dispenser.** The basic truth about low self-esteem is that it's based on lies. Somewhere back there, people we considered powerful said bad, untrue things about us which, driven by terror, loyalty and/or love, we chose to believe. Guide us back to our pre-self-loathing selves by consistently speaking the truth. Occasional reality checks detailing both the good and not-so-good about us, including manifestations of our self-loathing, reveal gently but firmly what about us, if anything, we might want to change.
- **Be patient.** Recognize that people with low self-esteem often take ages to make choices, initiate anything or speak our minds. That's because we're so sure we'll be scolded, teased or punished for whatever we do or say that it seems safer and wiser to do and say nothing at all. Recognize this, but don't encourage it. Demonstrate through your own behavior that even "bad" decisions can prove good or useful (even if only in a we'll-look-back-on-this-and-laugh-someday way) and that harsh repercussions aren't perpetually impending.
- **Accept the fact that you're not a therapist.** (Unless, of course, you are. But even then, you're not our therapist. Or at least probably *shouldn't* be.) When it comes to seeking reassurance, people with low self-esteem are manipulative bottomless pits. We'll force you you into giving us constant compliments, which we'll promptly reject, and into dull, fruitless navel-gazing sessions in which the only navel involved is ours. We'll virtually forbid you from criticizing us because, hey, we're fragile. Self-loathing is a form of narcissism. Playing on your eagerness to be our knights and knightettes in shining armor, we'll drain you bone-dry, making you so visibly frustrated and furious that we can then shout: "I *told* you I was terrible!" Win this game by refusing to play it. Set limits. Show your love and support by telling us that we need—and deserve—more qualified help from trained professionals and/or support groups. In my book, *Unworthy: How to Stop Hating Yourself*, I suggest SLAG (Self-Loathing All Gone) forums in which we can share our stories with fellow sufferers and take some of that pressure off our partners.
- **Tell us that we have a problem.** And tell us that our problem isn't what we think it is—that we're ugly, stupid, incompetent or whatever. Our problem is that we believe these lies. Our problem is not knowing what our real problem is. Tell us this.



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— ANNELI RUFUS

Starting Again—*with You*

WHEN TWO PEOPLE LOVE EACH OTHER, BUT HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO SUSTAIN A HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP, IT DOESN'T NECESSARILY MEAN THAT THEY NEED TO FIND A DIFFERENT PARTNER.

OFTEN WHEN A COUPLE with a long history together comes to me in an attempt to save their relationship, I find myself recommending that they ritualistically end the old relationship—even if they want to stay together.

It is a bit akin to having the right ingredients for a meal, but the wrong recipe. It is okay to say goodbye to that recipe, but that doesn't mean that you need to throw out the ingredients.

When two people love each other, but haven't been able to sustain a harmonious relationship, it doesn't necessarily mean that they need to find a different partner. Perhaps they just need a new means of relating to each other. This requires new skills and new tools.

If you are thinking that your partner is the problem in the relationship, you will likely have a problem no matter who you are with. When you take responsibility for what you are doing, thinking and saying in the relationship, you have the ability to make some major changes.

In fact, statistics imply that figuring it out with the spouse you have may actually yield better results than trying again with someone else. Statistics in Psychology Today state that 50% of first marriages, 67% of second marriages and 73% of third marriages end in divorce. While one study I found suggested that 72% of couples who decided to reunite with their previous partner were able to stay together. I maintain that you can reunite with your existing partner without having to sustain the painful process of divorce—but the old relationship needs to be put to rest.

I always love to pose the question, "If divorce were not an option, and living miserably together were not an option either, what would you do?" Living in the state of limbo of "Should we stay together or should be break up" creates so much confusion that we actually block opportunities to love each other. We unconsciously don't want to align with loving someone we think we will be leaving or who will be leaving us. If we take divorce off the table, even if just for a period of time, and align ourselves with being in a loving relationship, we often find that simply changing our frame of mind can change our behavior.

In the beginning of a relationship we often get caught up in the whirlwind of hormones, romance, and attraction. We then jump into getting married, having kids and figuring out the relationship as we go. That understandable, but haphazard approach is often fairly flawed and full of unconscious behaviors that lead to the relationship's demise.

When you take responsibility for what you are doing, thinking and saying in the relationship, you have the ability to make some major changes.

Here are some questions to consider:

- What would happen if you decided to end the relationship and took advantage of the opportunity to intentionally and consciously create the kind of relationship you actually wanted to have with your already existing partner?
- What if you worked together to decide what do you want in your relationship?
- What if you identified the values that you both hold near and dear and dedicated yourselves to living in alignment with them?
- What if you consciously took steps to learn new tools and practice new skills?
- What if you rekindled your intimacy?
- What if you each (or even just one of you) took 100% responsibility for how you showed up in the relationship?
- What if you identified the behaviors you do that don't work and personally committed yourself to a different course of action?
- What if instead of focusing on your partner's behavior, you focused on your own?

Sometimes when we simply take off the glasses of "what I don't like about you is…." and instead put on the glasses of "what I love about you is….", we find we are able to create a healthier, happier and renewed—if not new—relationship with the person we have shared so much of our lives with. We suddenly discover that we have achieved what we promised to do—to love 'for better and for worse' back to even better again.

— EVE HOGAN

5 Simple Ways to Breathe Life into a Relationship

YOU CAN REKINDLE THE CONNECTION WITH A LITTLE MINDFUL INQUIRY.

THE TURNING OF A YEAR seems to beg us to reevaluate, revitalize, and recommit. We resolve to do better and to be better in almost every area of our lives. The only problem is that when it comes to breathing new life into an old relationship, most of us are not sure how to do it.

But we used to know how! Try reinstating some behaviors that came naturally at the beginning of the relationship.

1 BE CURIOUS

Getting to know someone and sharing ourselves is an intoxicating experience. When we first meet, we evoke a childlike curiosity about the other, wanting to know all about them—their beliefs, dreams, and passions. The problem is that we tend to think these things are static. So, once we ask, we do not often ask again. However, we are all constantly changing, with new ideas, thoughts, and experiences, and most of us like to share them.

It's my theory that this is why, in part, the "grass looks greener" with someone else. When we meet someone new (whether in person or online), they show interest in our thoughts and feelings, while our loved one may feel they already know everything about us.



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I once saw a statistic that said families spend only 12 to 14 minutes a day in dialogue and 8 to 12 of those minutes are spent on task-oriented discussion. That leaves only 2 to 6 minutes a day for things like values, feelings, dreams, visions, spirituality, and relationship bonding.

You can rekindle the connection with a little mindful inquiry. Ask about the other person's bucket list. Ask about any changes in their favorites. Ask for opinions. Remember to explore without judgment. You are seeking to learn what is *new* with your partner, not what is wrong with them.

2 BE PRESENT

Put the phone away. Just as you have "office hours" when you can't be interrupted, so you should give your love life undivided attention daily ... even if only for a short period of time. Listen. Share. Laugh. Breathe. Notice.

3 TOUCH

Remember when you first met and you couldn't keep your hands off each other? I am not talking about sex, necessarily (although that can certainly help!). I'm talking about nurturing, loving touch. Hold hands, hug, pause to rub the other's shoulders, play footsie under the table, run your fingers through your loved one's hair, kiss regularly, reach out to caress without an agenda, and gaze into each other's eyes, touching each other's souls.

If your sexual encounters have gotten few and far between, prioritize some time together. Neither of you signed up for a roommate. You signed up for a sweetheart. Even if there are physical reasons you can't be as intimate as you once were, you can certainly find a way to share some sort of private, intimate loving time together. This is what sets your "love life" apart from your "life."

4 DO SOMETHING UNEXPECTED

One dictionary defines *romance* as "a tendency of mind toward the wonderful and mysterious, something belonging rather to fiction than to everyday life." Occasionally break the patterns of daily life. Go outside and look at the stars, read a book together instead of watching TV, enjoy a surprise date, have a picnic in the backyard. Think outside the "normal" box.

5 BE THE INITIATOR...

Of a hug, a kiss, a date, a walk, or an evening spent gazing at the full moon, singing, dancing, or talking about something fun. It isn't important who starts it—just be sure you aren't the one who stops it!

— EVE HOGAN

The Wisdom of *Disconnection*

RELATING TO OTHERS IS A FORM OF PLAY—A WILLINGNESS TO FLOW FROM CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTION AND BACK AGAIN.

EVERY NOW AND THEN, I help facilitate a group of men who meets weekly to have conversations about what it means to be a man. It's called Manology, and if I'm in the room, it's probably an all-gender session, where women and other genders are invited to participate in the discussion. To me, it feels like a rare space to have an opportunity to talk openly with people whose views and values I might deeply disagree with.

At one point, a very hot topic came up, and some of the participants were close to yelling at each other. I felt a strong aversion to what someone was saying, a kind of a physical resistance to that person and their opinion. I had to sit with it for a moment and check in with myself about why I was having such an intense reaction.

From the perspective of Tantra yoga philosophy, there is a constant flow between three states: "I'm nothing like you," "I'm something like you," and "I'm nothing but you." Everything in the universe is made of the same stuff, and oneness is our fundamental, natural state. The great gift of being a human, however, is that we are allowed a short period of time in which we experience the world as individuals. We forget our true connected nature in order to play as separate beings. Then, something shows up to connect us again, and we remember our oneness, only to forget it again and repeat the cycle all over.

As the argument in the room heated up, I could feel walls coming up between people who were trying to communicate about something hard. We needed to find some common ground, the "I'm something like you" that leads us back to connection. I started with the basics: the man I disagreed with and I both live in the same culture, and learned some of the same things about the world. I suddenly realized that the man I disagreed with was actually speaking for a small voice inside me that I have worked hard to try to silence.

Sometimes, when we have that strong aversion to what someone else is saying, it's much deeper than simple disagreement. This man's words were threatening my idea of myself. In a situation like this, the aversion reaction may not be to the other, but to some part of yourself that you have rejected or don't want to hear. After all, contempt is always on some level self-contempt.

Acknowledging the part of me that felt with this man allowed me to see us both as products of our environment as well as individuals. I could take a breath, move through the my clenched-jaw silence, and explain why and how my opinion had changed. Speaking from compassion and connection rather than anger and separateness allowed him to hear what I was saying—though I don't think I changed his mind!

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The point isn't to move from "I'm something like you" into "I'm nothing but you" and stop there. Oneness may be our fundamental nature, but it's no fun to stay there forever. There's wisdom in "I'm nothing like you": if it's okay to be individuals with our own viewpoints, tastes, values, and preferences, then it's okay for other people to have those as well. Relating to others becomes a form of play—a willingness to flow from connection and disconnection and back again. We can take a good look at ourselves, each other, and the world around us, and what we find may truly surprise us.

— JULIE PETERS



SHEVTSOVY/THINKSTOCK

How to Nurture Your *Most Important* Relationship

IF YOU CAN CLEARLY COMMUNICATE YOUR NEEDS TO YOURSELF, YOU WILL FIND IT EASIER TO COMMUNICATE YOUR NEEDS IN ANY RELATIONSHIP.

IF YOU WERE ASKED *How do you nurture your relationships?*, would you be able to give a good, concise answer? Maybe not, as talking about relationships is a lot like talking about love. We either tend to stumble looking for for a conceptual framework from which to speak, or we go on an on rambling.

Overwhelmed by the topic myself, a simple truth dawned on me. To borrow and adapt a famous phrase from the respected yogi, Krishnamurti: what you are, your relationships are, and without your transformation, there can be no transformation of the relationship.

In yogic philosophy, the simple truth taught is that if you want to make the world a better place, then you make yourself a better human. This is easily applied to say if you want your relationships to be healthier, then you make yourself healthier—the relationship will follow. Nurturing your "soulmate relationship" can start decades before you meet that special person.

Is this "self-work-comes-first" idea hard for us to grasp? Or perhaps we grasp it, but we just don't want to have to do the work. It's seems to be hard work, or intangible and vague work, and it might feel easier to just skate by and hope for the best. But the solution to healing and nurturing your relationships right now is a lot more approachable than you think.

Working on ourselves is less "workshop," and more simply paying attention to what is going on in our lives. Everything in our lives right now gives us clues as to what to do next. Our emotions are constantly signaling us to act or retreat. Learning to master this awareness and these emotions is a fundamental step, and is done through mindfulness.

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Mindfulness activities make us happier. As I have described in greater detail in a previous essay about using mindfulness for healing, these activities are anything that take us fully into this present moment to appreciate that which is around us. Mindfulness plays a key role in supporting us in healthy relationships. As we do our personal work to nurture mindfulness in our own lives, we find ourselves naturally happier, healthier people. This is a good soil for healthy, happy relationships to take root.

We can take comfort in our personal development and know that it's a perfect circle back to the most important external relationships in our lives. When we bring our mindfulness to our lives, our lives bloom like flowers. When our lives flourish, our relationships tend to flourish as well. If you can communicate well to yourself as to what your needs are, you find it easier to communicate your needs in any relationship, for example. The work is systemic.

If we decide to nurture ourselves through mindfulness, we could take up doing any number of simple things to help us. We can take a simple mindfulness walk at each lunch hour, or take ourselves on an excursion each week on some simple adventure - anything really, maybe a trip to the library to get a good book, or a visit to a park or a museum. Quality time for just ourselves, a book or a nibble of something, a hot bath on a cold night. We pay attention to what it feels like to be alive. Just spend quality time with yourself and build the most important relationship you have - your life long union with yourself.

We're all in this alone together. The work we do on ourselves (our aloneness) is vital to the well being of the body of humanity (our togetherness). When asked *How do you nurture your relationships?*, we can comfortably say *By nurturing the relationship I have with myself!*

— WILL DONNELLY

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