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Cupid's Arrow is Only the Beginning: Nourishing Your Relationship

By Timothy D. Stein, MFT

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The gift of a particularly romantic holiday, such as Valentine's Day, can be a mixed bag. It's a time to appreciate and celebrate the love shared by two people. It can also be a time when we realize that love has lost its flame and continues on as smoldering embers or, worse yet, cold ashes. Who should we thank or blame for this situation? Cupid! For better or worse, this mischievous cherub's bow and arrow sets love into motion.

Cupid is the roman god of passionate love. His name is derived from the Latin word *cupido*, which is translated as "desire" (to wish or long for). The Romans were a wise bunch. Passionate love starts with desire, a wish or longing to be with, share time with, and experience another.

But what happens next? I may desire a Porsche but once I have the Porsche, what happens to my desire? Unless I have the resources to continually upgrade my vehicular adrenaline rush, I need to shift from a desire for something to a desire to experience something. "Porsche, there is no substitute" refers to being behind the wheel, not possessing the car. The same is true of relationships; a relationship works when both partners value the experience of the relationship and not just the possession of it. We commonly hear people lament the loss of the spark that brought them together. Truth be told, the spark disappears in every relationship. The real work of a relationship is not experiencing the spark but nourishing the flame.

Here are some ways to nourish your relationship's flame.

Date each other again. When we are dating, we are excited to be with the other person and naturally find all kinds of ways to express this excitement. As our relationship grows, we can make the fatal mistake of assuming our partner knows how much we appreciate and value them and our "desire" to express our appreciation wanes. Find, rekindle, and embrace this desire once again. What did you do when you were dating to show your love? Flowers. Loving (or sexy) notes. Back massages. Walks on the beach. Candle lit dinner. Think back and dust off your expressions of "desire."

Break out of your routine. I loved the show "Mad About You." In one of the openings, Paul and Jamie Buchman are in their morning routine brushing their teeth until one of them moves out of their routine. Paul ends up with toothpaste on his neck but it is also the first time they really notice each other that morning. We all have our routines and staying in them is easy and comforting. However, it is easy to mistake comfort with a routine for connection with another person. Mix up your routine. Have breakfast in bed. Give your partner a big cuddle and kiss first thing in the morning. Have lunch together. Swap who showers first or shower together. Cook dinner together. Shifting your routine can make it easier to notice, appreciate, and "desire" your partner.

Talk. Sometimes the challenge is not nourishing the flame but getting past all the barriers so we can nourish it. Many people think that protecting the flame from the winds of life is the same as nourishing it. This is definitely not the case. While a protected flame may seem safer it will burn through its fuel and go out unless it is nourished. While letting some disappointments and frustrations go is healthy, if we fail to address some of these, especially the significant ones, we build a barrier between our self and our partner. While some winds can put out a flame, others can make it burn hotter. Talk about your frustrations and your “desires.” Remove whatever issues are getting in the way of adding fuel to the fire of your relationship.

Listen. You keep a fire going by paying attention to it and adding fuel when it gets low. To keep the flame in our relationship burning, we also must pay attention to it. Listening to our partner and doing our best to accept and understand their joys, sorrows, frustrations, and desires is one way we can pay attention to our flame. Best of all, by really listening to our partner, we will discover exactly what fuel we can provide that will help maintain their half of the flame.

Ask for what you want. I used to call my wife at work to let her know I was thinking about her. I love it when people let me know they’re thinking about me. It makes me smile. Unfortunately, it made my wife want to change her phone number at work. What I want and was naturally giving was definitely not what my wife wanted from me. So we each made a list of what makes us feel loved and appreciated and shared these lists with each other. It is easy to assume, after years in a relationship, that we know what the other person likes. However, couples who are friends of mine as well as couples I work with in therapy constantly prove this assumption to be wrong. It doesn’t matter if the relationship is 1 year old or going on 50, we simply do not really know what the other person wants to feel loved unless we ask them. So, even if it seems obvious, share this information with each other. A flame burns strongest when given the right fuel.

Love starts when Cupid’s arrow ignites desire between two people. Lasting love happens when we hold onto that desire and transform it into an appreciation of our shared experience. Getting into a relationship is not the goal. Getting behind the wheel and continually experiencing your relationship is the goal. Date each other, break out of your routine, talk, listen, and ask for what you want. These are ways to experience your relationship, not just possess it. “Love, there is no substitute.”

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