

## **Time-Starved Marriages of the 21st Century**

People in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seem to be rushing to keep up with their lives, and their marriages are suffering. Couples often slip into patterns that leave little opportunity for intimacy and sex, finding themselves instead preoccupied with work, parenting responsibilities, or watching television. Check yourself and your marriage against what goes on behind the closed office door of a *sex and relationship therapist*. In what follows, see what resonates for you and be curious about how you might like to make some changes to improve your marriage or your long-term relationship.

### **Sharing “Strokes” is the Foundation of a Strong Marriage**

One of the foundations of a marriage is sharing good strokes. These can be in the form of physical affection, positive verbal messages, or simply making eye contact with your mate. Most couples when asked, “*Do you think your relationship would be better if you gave out more good strokes?*” will say “*Yes, it would.*”

Why don't people give out more strokes if they believe it would be positive to do so? They often report being too busy or too tired, sometimes to the point of feeling that they are functioning in *survival mode*. When people are this stressed and exhausted they are using all their energy to *just get by*, they feel as if their lives are out of control and they have nothing left to give. They are often not even feeling open to receiving love, and might find themselves making destructive choices. For people who report managing their lives adequately, they often do not consciously pay attention to giving good strokes. And yet the average person can feel much more fulfilled when he/she does pay more attention to positively nurturing his/her mate. If you need some structure to help you change the pattern in your marriage, challenge yourselves -- alternate days (with your partner) giving some verbal or physical affection to your mate, thereby stretching your comfort zone and taking action.

## **“Time Thieves” That Prevent You From Spending Time on Your Marriage**

Beware of the things that steal or consume your precious time – the *Time Thieves*! Typical *Time Thieves* are the television, the computer, and the telephone (especially our high usage of cell phones in the 21<sup>st</sup> century). Instead of spending an intimate half hour together at bedtime, one or both people may be watching the news or a regular TV program. If this is one of the blocks to getting together, consider an immediate and easy action plan that can put you in control of your time. Record your TV program and then you can watch it when it suits you, fast forward through the commercials, and pause the program so you can turn your attention to, for example, your mate, without missing something on TV.

When do you have private time with your mate? Do you pay special attention to each other instead of focusing your attention elsewhere? In time-starved marriages there is so much on the schedule that there isn't much time left for being together with those we love.

Once a couple is married they seem reluctant to make dates together thinking that seems too contrived. Yet, making a date or setting aside time to be together is one way to elevate your couple time to a higher priority level. Getting private time on the schedule may make the difference in whether you get together or not.

## **Finding Time To Nurture Your Marriage**

Couples who have difficulty coordinating their schedules or who work different shifts may need to be creative in finding other avenues for connection, such as writing notes or sending loving email or voicemail messages. Another opportunity for significant positive change in quality time together is to ensure that the couple/family eats meals together more often. On a more intimate note, Pepper Schwarz and Janet Lever have written a book entitled *The Great Sex Weekend*, which guides couples in revitalizing their sexual and romantic lives.

Mira Kirshenbaum, in her 2005 book, *The Weekend Marriage* describes the phenomenon of couples who generally sleep together under the same roof, but rarely have enough time for each other except on weekends. To discover if your time-starved lifestyle is the major reason your marriage is suffering, Kirshenbaum proposes the “No-Time-For-Love Test.” Basically the couple reflect back to see if they felt better or worse the last time that they were together for some extended couple time. If you generally felt better when you spent quality time together, then your relationship has been suffering from a time problem rather than a fundamental relationship problem.

Kirshenbaum describes how couples can successfully live in a weekend marriage by emotionally nourishing the relationship so that time-starvation does not kill the marriage. The four essential steps are: 1) taking care of yourself and recharging your batteries, 2) breaking free of your old patterns, 3) finding ways to be intimate and share love in the limited time available, and 4) making a commitment to not saying or doing anything that would injure the relationship.

### **A Case Example: In Therapy, Amy and Peter Discover How To Spend More Time on Their Marriage**

Amy and Peter are a couple in their late thirties with two children aged three and eight. Peter works in the computer industry and often has to work late or travel out of town for meetings. Amy is an office administrator with a busy 8:00 to 4:30 job. Peter drops the children off (the younger one at daycare and the older one at school) and Amy picks them both up at the day care at the end of her work day. Their evenings are occupied with dinner and parenting and once the children are in bed, Peter is usually at the computer and Amy finds herself doing some household tasks or watching her favourite TV programs. By bedtime, Amy feels too tired to be intimate with Peter and he finding this frustrating and feeling rejected, stays up and goes to bed later. Their weekends are filled with household chores, the children’s activities, and social commitments. Amy complains that Peter doesn’t contribute enough at home and that he expects too much of her

sexually. Peter complains that he doesn't get recognition for what he contributes at home and he thinks that Amy has gotten cold and seems to wall him out.

In therapy, both Amy and Peter were able to stop their blaming and take responsibility for how each was contributing to the current state of their marriage. Peter was able to examine his preoccupation with work and finances and realized how much he was becoming like his father in this way (something he had always vowed to himself not to do).

Amy was able to address issues relating to her poor body image and how she felt she had *let herself go* due to lack of time and energy since the children were born. She was feeling overwhelmed by her work, parenting, and responsibility for running the household. With Peter's emotional and practical support she was able to find a better balance and to open up again to being with Peter. The couple began to be more loving and make time to be together.

### **When It's Time to Enter Marriage Therapy**

In addition to being time-starved, marriages may have more fundamental problems. If you and your mate can't sort out what is keeping you stuck or if you've figured it out, but things aren't changing then it's time to seek the help of a marriage and family therapist. Unfortunately, some couples stall and don't seek therapy until there is a significant crisis such as extramarital affair which adds more negative consequences. Sexual problems in particular can have a big impact on a marriage. Although they may result from relationship conflicts, they may also simply be difficulties of a personal or sexual nature that can harm the marriage if they are not solved. It is sad when people have grown apart to such an extent that one person in the couple feels that they have lost their interest in rebuilding the marriage.

### **Notice Problem Signs In Your Marriage Early**

Just as in our bodies, it helps in our marriages to notice signs of problems early. “We have communication problems” is one of the most common complaints that couples bring into a therapist’s office. “We don’t talk the way we used to.” If this sounds familiar, set aside time to talk and take turns initiating the talks. Talk about your relationship and take the opportunity to reassess your priorities and whether or not they are reflected in your day-to-day life. Are you moving toward your goals and your dreams for the future?

It takes inner strength and the ability to calm yourself if you are going to open up with your partner, but this is *intimacy*, showing your true self to your mate. David Schnarch, author of Passionate Marriage, helps couples discover the rewards of true intimacy, but he warns “Loving is not for the weak.”

So, are you in a time-starved marriage or relationship? Consider what you and your partner need to do to make a difference. If your life has become too serious, find ways to relax and be playful together. Remember that a time-starved marriage needs attention to increase not only the time you spend together with your mate, but also the quality of that time. Setting aside private time will make a big difference, but when time is limited you also need to commit to capturing the opportunities for togetherness as they appear. As my in-house expert on life’s mysteries reminds me, “Life without passion is like music without sound.”

**If you feel your marriage is “time-starved” and could use the help of a skilled couples therapist, contact Dr. Rucker, at her Vancouver, BC office. She can be reached by phone at (604) 731-4466 or by email at [bianca@biancarucker.com](mailto:bianca@biancarucker.com).**