



Great Relationships: Five Things I've Learned from Couples in My Practice

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My work is to counsel and sometimes teach, but I also learn from my clients. Every relationship is different of course. Still, as I look back over the years, it's easy to see that there is much we all share. Below are five things I've learned from my own relationship and from couples in my practice.

1. In every crisis there is a treasure. Even in the toughest situations there is an opportunity to emerge from it feeling stronger, closer, more valued. For couples I work with, the crisis might be about money, in-laws, illness, or parenting. But the arguments that come out of this crisis are never about what they seem. Inside the emotional distance or the harsh words is the real crisis. Each person is longing to feel valued, wanted, appreciated. Each person is wondering, "Am I important? Do you care about me? Do I matter?" Each person is secretly looking for closeness and trust.
2. Time together can work magic. It's easy to get caught up in daily routines. It's easy to forget that relationships need time too. Sometimes I ask couples to set aside 20 minutes a day just to talk, without the need to solve problems or make each other feel better. Just listen, and try to understand what it's like to walk in your partner's shoes. Or go out for coffee, window shop, go dancing, walk the dog, relax together and listen to the rain. Give your relationship the gift of your time so it can grow.
3. Your needs count too. Ask for what you want. Share your wishes and dreams with your partner. Make room for them in your relationship – even if it's hard at first. When Greg asked his wife Laura to spend two weeks away from their family, she was upset at first. "I took it personally," she said. "I thought he wanted time away from me and the kids. But then I remembered how much he enjoys those rugged trips, and how he doesn't get to do them any more. And I wanted him to have that back in his life."
4. Differences add spice. Some couples are surprised to discover, sometimes years into their relationship, that they have very different wishes and dreams. Sometimes differences can feel like they get in the way. For example, Sandy grew up as an only child, and liked her holidays calm and peaceful. Jack had a large extended family, and for him a holiday celebration meant being surrounded by people and activity. At first they argued – Sandy found huge gatherings exhausting, and Jack couldn't imagine missing any of his family events. But as they began to understand each other's needs and values on a deeper level, they were able to create a holiday that was meaningful to both of them.
5. The small things matter. Big events are fun – a great vacation, an unexpected gift. But it's the small things that make the biggest difference. A touch on the arm at just the right time. A surprise kiss. A realization that your partner cares, that you matter. In counseling, too, it's the small moments that count. In each session, we look at the big picture: I help couples understand how they get stuck, why they react so strongly to each other's words. I suggest different ways to approach a problem or give homework. But it's the small moments of closeness we create in the session – and later at home – that matter most.

These lessons are a gift. As we move into 2010, it's important to remember: in every crisis there is a treasure; time together can work magic; your needs count too; differences add spice; and small things matter. Like clues on a treasure map, these lessons point the way to the real prize – a close, loving relationship. Happy New Year!



I'd be happy to read about lessons you've learned from your own relationships. Send your stories or comments to Pat@LaDouceurMFT.com. It is possible, but not guaranteed, that I will publish them anonymously in a future article.

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