

*Love Life Tips & Advice by Diana Kirschner, Ph.D.*

## **Personal Excellence: Four Keys to Love that Lasts**

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*"All happy families resemble one another. Each unhappy family is unique in its grief." ~Tolstoy, Anna Karenina*

Personal excellence in your love relationship is not achieved by reading couples self-help books or dumping the problem partner you're with and going on to the next grass-is-greener pasture to find the One. It can only be achieved the hard way, through daily, weekly and monthly practice of four key strategies that keep love alive and thriving.

How do I know this? I've been married to the same man for over 25 years. Happily married. We've weathered one of our families disowning us and refusing to even meet our baby girl because one of us is Jewish while the other is Italian; the devastating death of a child; a life-threatening illness; stormy fights; and the deadly boring stretches when we seemed to have nothing in common.

But today we're stronger, more in love and sexier than ever together.

These days marriages are dying out faster and faster. The average marriage is now under seven years. Yet research shows that married people are healthier, wealthier and happier. In fact, marital happiness contributes far more to personal happiness than any other factor, including work and friendship satisfaction. Bottom line: if you want personal excellence in your life it is critical to create, nurture and sustain a committed loving relationship.

Like a crusader, I've dedicated the last 20+ years of my life to finding the holy grail of love. Armed with an M.A. and a Ph.D. in psychology, I realized success leaves

secrets. This is why I went on my own personal journey of demystifying the elusive mystery of finding real and ever-lasting love. While on this journey I studied happy couples (hard to find, but I did) and apprenticed with mentors, other psychologists and self-help gurus so I could find the secret dynamics that make love work. And in the end I was able to distill out four key practices that are crucial in keeping love alive.

These are the practices I've used in my own lab, my marriage, that have allowed my husband, Sam, and I to weather the family upsets, disappointments, setbacks, losses and other slings and arrows that most couples face. I've also used these powerful practices to help thousands of other couples create love that lasts.

The four keys to happily-ever-after are: 1) Spending Time Alone as A Couple; 2) Holding Listening Sessions; 3) Planning for Sex; and, 4) Resolving Conflict.

### **1) Spending Time Alone As A Couple**

Research shows that couples who report the highest level of satisfactions spend the most amount of time alone together. This means no kids, no friends, no family, no attention-grabbing pets: just the two of you.

Sam and I were juggling private practices and running a therapy center in the early years of our marriage. Needless to say, at the end of the day we were ready to fall into bed and it sure wasn't for sex! Weekends were spent zooming around on errands and the kids' play dates and activities. But we knew the dangers of continuing on this path.

### What Saved Us

We permanently set aside **Alone Time** twice a week for us, once during the day and once at night. We hired a permanent babysitter and back-up for those times. And for an unbroken string of years, we have kept that time sacred, no matter what. It's been the

bedrock that holds us together as best friends.

## **2) Holding Listening Sessions**

Research shows that effective communication is a common trait of healthy couples.

And at the heart of effective communication is the ability to listen to your partner without judgment. When Sam and I met we were psych grad students, rivals for the same stipends and awards. We were young know-it-alls for whom listening was a foreign ritual. This meant we were drifting farther and farther apart.

### What Saved Us

We scheduled **FORMAL Ten Minute Listening Sessions** with each other every other day. In these sessions, one person gets to talk, free associate, say whatever is on their minds while the other **SIMPLY LISTENS** with full attention. The listener does not speak. No matter what, we used a clock and honored a full ten minute session.

Anything that was said in that time was sacred and could not be brought up during an argument!

Sam and I still use these sessions to get to know each other all over again.

Mind reading doesn't work. You never really know your partner's world until you listen.

## **3) Planning for Sex**

Sex releases oxytocin, which is the cuddle or bonding hormone. This is the powerful hormone that triggers the nurturing instinct toward newborns. Sex also creates a shared endorphin release—so that the partners associate feeling good with each other. On the other hand, infidelity is the biggest love buster. So having regular sex is a good thing.

After we had kids, Sam and I made the same ridiculous choices that other young couples make, such as going to the Home Depot, Wal-Mart or Toys R Us instead of making love. We rushed around until we had finally checked off our entire to-do list, except for the last item. The most important activity of all. Then we wondered why we didn't feel connected with each other.

### What Saved Us

We set aside time when sex was moved all the way up on the to-do list, to number one. We made one of our weekly dates into a **Regular Sexy Encounter** where we played with toys, lingerie and videos, all in the context of having an affair--with each other. To get going on this path I would ask myself, "Would you be wearing this ratty bathrobe if you were meeting your new lover? What would you be doing or saying?" And Sam would do the same. If one of us wasn't in the mood, he or she would start to fool around anyway. And sure enough, the mood turned around and heated up.

Couples expect spontaneous great sex to happen like in the movies. But after a couple has been together awhile great sex takes planning. Then the spontaneity happens. It's like going to an amusement park. You need to buy the tickets, do a mapquest and clear your schedules; then you ride the roller coaster.

#### **4) Conflict Resolution**

The latest marital research shows that happy couples relate to each other with a golden five-to-one rule. That is, they have five positive, loving exchanges for every critical or negative one. On the other hand, marriages with high degrees of conflict, with lots of contempt, criticism, defensiveness and the silent treatment are unhappy and very likely to fail.

I noticed that just like the other couples I was counseling Sam and I followed the five-to-one rule all right. But mostly in reverse. In fact, we got so mean to each other that we were riding what love researcher, Dr. John Gottman, calls a horseman of the Apocalypse. In other words, we were doomed.

### What Saved Us

We realized that everyone screws up and says stupid things, especially to their partners. People get tired and snappy, irritable and defensive. They can be downright insulting. Everybody can.

But we wanted to stop our negative moments from exploding into World War III. We both knew that the World War III scenario was killing off our marriage. So we used a signal with each other to transform an incendiary exchange that was heading into battle into one that drew us together.

We realized that reality is, in a sense, like a ‘movie’ we are making all the time. If you want to make a great romance, you need to practice ‘rewinding the tape’ when you don’t like ‘the take.’ We agreed that either of us could call out “**Take Two**” whenever he/she was hurt or offended by an interaction. Then we would start the interaction all over again and construct it in a more loving win-win way—as a happy improv. If Sam had trouble saying the words I needed to hear on a **Take Two**, I would teach him and vice versa. This technique has saved us many many times!

The last time Sam and I were on a plane together we started snapping at each other and then we did a **Take Two**. I wound up sitting on his lap telling him a joke. The stewardess asked us how long we had been going out together! She was shocked when we answered, “Over 25 years!”

So there you have it: four magic practices that deliver excellence in your love relationship. If we can do it, so can you.

P.S. You can use these practices even if your partner won't cooperate. On your own you can find a few minutes of couple time when you can be a good listener; act like you're having an affair with your partner; or change your mean-spirited words into loving ones. If you do this consistently, 99% of the time your partner will join in and your love will thrive.

You can learn much more about this topic and how to create love that is just right for you in my new book, *Love in 90 Days: The Essential Guide to Finding Your Own True Love*. Pre-order it now from Amazon.com at a 20-25% discount.

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