

Your Relationship Tune-up

Our relationships are living, breathing entities that require care, feeding, and attention to flourish. Inattention and a lack of reverence for the relationship are two of the usual suspects in marital malaise. You get your teeth cleaned twice a year and change the oil in your car every 5,000 miles. Did you ever think about a yearly tune-up for your primary relationship?

A relationship tune-up starts with an hon-

most as stressful as losing one.

Quality Time. In my work with couples, I find that most often quality time is noticeably lacking. If your level of stress has risen over the last year, it's likely that your time together has diminished. Couples who are overrun by stress see their marriages relapse, while those who can help each other cope with it keep their marriages strong. I recommend spending 20 to 30 minutes a

news. Did you know that your relationship has an emotional bank account, an accumulation of the kindnesses you extend toward your partner on (it is hoped) a daily basis? These emotional savings "deposits" can serve as a cushion when times get rough, when the couple is faced with a major life stress or conflict ("withdrawal"). Because they have stored up this goodwill, healthy couples are better able to make allowances for each other when a conflict arises. And the biggest payoff from this emotional bank account isn't the cushion it offers when the couple is stressed: Turning toward your spouse in the little ways is also the key to long-lasting romance.

Dreams. Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way*, wrote, "Each of us has an inner dream that we can unfold if we will just have the courage to admit what it is." When couples fight, if a clenched fist is opened up, inside you find a dream. In fact, almost everything we fight about has at its core the fear that our partner doesn't care about our dream. This is one of the first things we ask couples: What is your partner's dream? How is s/he progressing toward it? What are you doing to assist your partner in reaching his or her dream? During your inventory, check on the status of the dreams of you and your partner. Relationships are hard enough. Losing sight of your dreams renders them arid and meaningless.

If your inventory has revealed weaknesses and threats, you may want to have an objective third party lay eyes on the relationship. A skilled couples therapist will be able to identify your blind spots and make suggestions. Sometimes this requires regular sessions, but once you're on track, often a single session per year is enough to keep you pointed in the right direction.

In the next few weeks of this New Year, commit to your partner to invest in a relationship – you'll be glad you did.



est assessment of the last year. Set aside a weekend afternoon or, if you can, an overnight at your favorite getaway spot. With a promise to each other to suspend all judgment, take an inventory of your relationship (the business model of SWOT – strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats – comes to mind). Here are some areas that you might want to take a look at:

Stress. Like our cars and our bodies, our relationships are subject to environmental factors. Has the level of stress in your relationship changed in the past year? Several years ago, the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* published a scale to measure one's level of stress. The authors interviewed thousands of people and measured their subjective level of stress for 44 common life events. One of the most interesting facts the researchers discovered was that life events that we routinely see as positive can actually increase our stress. For example, going on vacation is as stressful as a minor law violation, and getting a new job is al-

day in a "stress-reducing conversation." This daily check-in is crucial to a marriage's long-term health.

These stress-reducing conversations should occur when things quiet down for the evening – the kids are in bed, and household chores are finished. My wife and I often incorporate our stress-reducing conversation into a leisurely nighttime walk through our neighborhood, and it's often the most precious part of my day.

The cardinal rule is that you talk about whatever is on your mind outside of your marriage. This is not the time to discuss any conflicts between you. It's an opportunity to support each other emotionally concerning other areas in your lives. Here are some other tips: take turns, don't give unsolicited advice (men tend to "problem solve" too soon), show genuine interest, and most importantly, don't side with the enemy by defending your partner's antagonist.

How's Your Love Bank? In our current economy, bank failures are regularly in the

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