

their relationship by agreeing on how much time per month they want to spend on couple activities and how much time pursuing separate interests.

The next couple we'll meet are suffering from another common complaint — extreme jealousy and lack of trust.

Vivian, 37, is a college professor who frequently travels out of town to attend professional conferences. Her lover, Cay, 27, is a potter who did not attend college. Last year Cay became irritable and picked a fight whenever Vivian packed to attend a conference. She stated bitterly that she was sure Vivian would find a woman she'd prefer at one of these conferences and would return home to tell Cay the relationship was over. With each of Cay's outbursts, Vivian became increasingly frustrated. One time, instead of reasonably trying to reassure Cay as usual, Vivian yanked her suitcase off the bed and threw it on the floor, shouting that she might as well have an affair this time, since Cay wouldn't ever trust her, anyway! After more yelling, accusations, threats and tears, the women decided to go to couple counseling to see if there were any miracles available.

Well, not surprisingly, they didn't solve their problem right away in counseling. They *did* get ideas and support from their counselor which helped them begin talking about what they appreciated in each other. Vivian told Cay she valued Cay's creativity, spontaneity and emotional warmth. Cay was relieved to hear this and shared she'd been concerned Vivian would become bored with her because she didn't feel she could compete with Vivian's intellectual friends. Cay told Vivian she valued her emotional depth, integrity, and her passion for ideas. Vivian was pleased and confessed she'd been afraid Cay might come to find her stodgy and uninteresting. Vivian and Cay resolved to start telling each other more often what they appreciated. This helped to remind them they did have some strong reasons for being together.

Cay and Vivian also examined how unrealistic expectations of each other contributed to their problems. Vivian had assumed Cay would take it for granted she was loved without being shown in concrete ways. Cay assumed having a lover would give her all the nurturing and security she'd missed from her mother. Vivian decided to practice showing more affection to Cay, even if she felt awkward at first. Cay now makes a point of planning activities with friends when Vivian is away. The two continue to work at talking honestly and trusting each other's good intentions.

One of the troublesome expectations lovers often hold is that because someone loves us, they'll know what we want without being told (and they'll also deliver it!).

David is turning 40 next month. What he'd really like is to have a big party to celebrate. He and his lover, Jonathan, have a large circle of friends. David would love to have a barbeque for about 25 people and Jonathan's yard would be perfect. David is afraid of appearing egotistical about his birthday, so he hopes Jonathan will surprise him with such a party without his having to bring up the subject. He frequently drops hints to Jonathan about his upcoming birthday. When Jon asks David how he'd like to celebrate, David feels embarrassed to tell the truth so he plays it cool: "Oh, it's no big deal." Jonathan has decided David is depressed about turning 40 and would prefer a quiet day with a couple of small gifts from Jonathan. How can disaster be averted?

Despite what many believe, lovers can't usually read each other's minds and it is permissible and, indeed, highly advisable, to ask for what we want. When Jonathan asks David what

he'd like to do for his birthday, David could say something like, "Well, I hope you won't think this is, ah, childish and egotistical, but what I'd really love is for you to give me a party and invite all our friends." There is, of course, a chance Jonathan would say, "You're right, it is childish and egotistical. Forget it." It is much more likely Jonathan would reply along the lines of, "That's a great idea. Turning 40 is a big deal. I'm glad you feel like celebrating instead of being depressed. I'll start calling tonight." Jonathan would probably feel relieved at not having to guess what David wants.

Solid couple relationships often suffer from outside stresses such as one or both people in school, unemployed, living with children, coming out to parents, or having difficulties at work. It's vital to structure some time alone together for intimacy, romance, sex, or even constructive arguing — preferably not in that order!

What — I'm recommending couples argue? Yes, I am — if the "fights" are constructive. If couples never argue, resentment can build up and cause emotional withdrawal and eventually destructive fighting. How can a couple fight constructively? One step is to take responsibility for our own feelings about what's making us mad, instead of blaming or attacking the other person.

Discussions will be more profitable if each person listens carefully and allows the other to finish talking. This is hard to do when we're upset and one or both people may need to go for a short walk or otherwise safely discharge physical and emotional tension before discussing their intense feelings.

Okay, we've done our constructive fighting, cleared the air and resolved some differences. We're feeling close again. But now it's time to clean up the kitchen, do the laundry, go grocery shopping or go to work. This is why we sometimes need to schedule intimate, even romantic, even sexual times. Now, I know this is not a popular idea. We want to be free and spontaneous — swept away by passion! So, we schedule time for everything *except* special time with our lovers. After we do all the things we have to do, there may not be enough time left over for making love or even a candlelight dinner. We'll schedule time to get our teeth cleaned and the oil changed in the car and wonder why we never have time to be intimate.

Some couple difficulties are more easily solved than others. Outside help can be beneficial in a variety of situations, such as when: 1) a couple reaches an impasse over a recurring conflict; 2) the couple wants to improve communication skills; or 3) outside stresses are causing strain on the relationship. Couple and/or individual counseling or other specialized help is definitely indicated when: 1) physical and/or emotional abuse is occurring; 2) alcohol and/or drug abuse is involved; 3) traumatic events from the past are having serious effects on the relationship; or 4) the couple cannot agree on basic "contract" issues, for example, monogamy versus an "open relationship."

As illustrated in the examples above, couples can often get along more happily by: 1) looking honestly at our own feelings and talking out problems; 2) being realistic and clear about our expectations; 3) understanding how "baggage" from the past can affect our lives today; 4) fighting constructively; and 5) spending special time together.

We often think of our relationships as a thing that we have. Kate Clinton pokes fun at this idea when she jokes, "Look, dear, here comes the Relation ship!" Relating positively to another is more accurately a challenging choice we make each day.

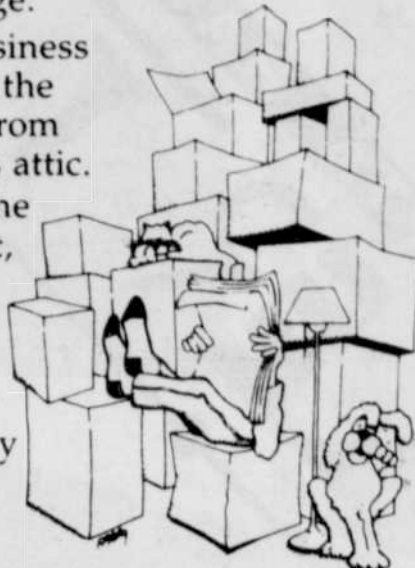
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