

Lasting Love

Keeping the romance alive will help keep you alive, too

The number-one song in the spring of 1938 was the Gershwin-penned ballad “Our Love is Here to Stay.” It was an ode to the kind of love that transcends the trendy (“The radio and the telephone and the movies that we know / May just be passing fancies and in time may go”) and survives even seismic shifts (“The Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble / They’re only made of clay”) to last “not for a year but ever and a day.”

Frank and Anita Milford, like many young couples, enjoyed dancing cheek to cheek to the strains of the romantic hit. The two had met at a dance as teenagers, liked each other immediately, and were now celebrating their 10th anniversary. Their bond would prove so enduring that “Our Love is Here to Stay” would seem written just for them.

The Rockies may not have crumbled and Gibraltar didn’t tumble, but a lot of other things happened over the course of the Milfords’ 81-year marriage: the stock market crashed, the Germans bombed their hometown, the invention of the microchip ushered in the information age, and Guns ‘n Roses and Lady Gaga replaced George and Ira Gershwin on the charts. Through it all, the pair remained inseparable, while never losing what it was that made them each unique.

Mrs. Milford, a self-described “chatterbox,” often butted heads with her dockyard-worker husband, who was more of the strong, silent type. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s healthy,” she said in a 2008 interview at the nursing home in England where both she and Mr. Milford lived. As she pointed out, they always made sure to resolve their differences and to end each day with a cuddle and a kiss.

Give and take

Mrs. Milford also shared her insights into why so many relationships fall apart and what couples could do to avoid such a fate. “Couples these days don’t last long because they often don’t take enough time for each other,” she remarked. “There isn’t enough respect: love is about give and take. Our advice to young couples would be to make time for a little romance every day.”

Ask anyone in a successful relationship how they make it work and the answer is bound to sound a lot like Mrs. Milford’s. But as simple as it seems, giving your partner your time and respect is actually a huge challenge -- perhaps more so now than in eras past as the stress of busy schedules and the promotion of a “me-first” mentality wear away at the bonds between couples.

Today, “irreconcilable differences” are the top reason why couples seek divorce. Many people get married only to discover that their spouse isn’t who they thought they were or become embroiled in constant conflict with no mutual solution in sight.



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Not all broken marriages are salvageable, of course, but lack of time and respect is the one surefire way to let differences define (and scuttle) your relationship. On the other hand, spending time together, learning what makes your partner unique, and making an effort to appreciate them both as an individual and as your "better half" can help build a relationship whose sum is greater than its parts. The added benefit of keeping the romance alive is that you'll also be helping to keep yourself alive, too.

Embraceable you

As a human being, you're born into relationship with others, beginning with your parents. The strength and substance of those relationships -- particularly the one you develop with your partner -- ultimately has a major bearing on your state of health. Leading health expert Stewart Wolf goes so far as to say that the quality of a person's relationships may play a greater role in preventing heart disease than smoking and diet combined. "People are nourished by people," he states, citing the findings of a landmark Pennsylvania study.

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Further proof of the importance of healthy relationships comes from Lisa Berman of the Harvard School of Public Health. Her findings, corroborated by those of many other researchers, show that the heart beats stronger in people who are happily married as well as socially active and close to their parents. Having someone who cares about you and whom you care about in turn is clearly associated with decreased stress and the adoption of healthier behaviors.

Even the simple act of cuddling, which the Milfords did religiously for all of their married life, has been proven to enhance your health. Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill measured blood pressure and stress hormones in 38 couples before and after a brief episode of warm contact, such as discussing a happy moment, watching a romantic film, and hugging. The results revealed a drop in blood pressure and lower levels of stress hormones.

The upshot is: if you and your spouse enjoy a happy marriage, it will probably take a long time for death to part you. That certainly proved to be the case for Frank and Anita Milford. Last September, their decades-long love story finally came to an end when Mr. Milford passed away at the age of 101 with his centenarian wife holding his hand.

Love will find a way

Show your partner that your love is indeed here to stay -- and you along with it. This Valentine's Day, try these suggestions to help nurture your relationship and boost your health and longevity in the process:

- Learn the five different love languages: words of affirmation, receiving gifts, quality time, acts of service, and physical touch. Each of them is a way you can express your devotion and commitment to your partner. Determine which is most important and which is least important to them; then, begin expressing yourself in their love language of choice. You'll be amazed at the results.
- Write down a list of seven things that your special someone loves. Think about what they like to talk about, what they think about, what they spend their money on, and what they spend their time doing. Ask them if you don't know: it will show them that you care. Create a special evening -- Valentine's Day can be just the beginning -- and include as many of your loved one's favorite things as you can.
- Make a conscious effort to respect and even embrace your differences. Although you might see them as a source of tension, it's far healthier to think of them as complementing each other. Be sure to tell your partner that you appreciate them. Studies show that appreciation of others has a strong correlation to health and wellness.