

**KEEP YOUR HOUSE A LOVING HOME****WITH SHARING AND SEPARATENESS**

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Come live with me and be my love,

And we will all the pleasures prove...

Christopher Marlowe, *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*

Can this poet's romantic image of living together be a reality in today's world among dishes to wash, money that's too short, and work hours that are too long? Absolutely yes. Happy marriages are not just a TV fiction. Many couples do steer skillfully through the challenges of everyday life together, staying steadily on the road of pleasurable loving. Paradoxically, one key to an ever-close connection is for spouses to allow each other separateness.

Maintaining a marriage in which spouses enjoy both sharing and separateness requires sensitivity to these dimensions as spouses plan how they use their time, space, and money, and in how they talk with each other.

Louisa and Bill actively enjoy their ordinary time together. They laugh. They tease each other. They share intimate thoughts of satisfactions and sorrows, fears and fondnesses. They play together, even as they fold clothes, diaper babies, help the older children with homework, cook and clean, and weed the garden. They also enjoy special times—evenings watching the moon from their front porch, or nights out together.

Louisa and Bill understand that individual alone time also has a revitalizing impact for them.

Louisa loves her work out of the house when the children are in school, and Bill enjoys his career. Louisa also treasures her artistic time, which doubles as her sport as she is a dancer. Bill plays tennis with friends, and loves occasional long bicycle rides on his own. “Being separate refuels us for time together. Time together refuels us for time apart.”

Marriage does not mandate that all time and pleasures be in duplicate. Reading, day-dreaming, individual sports, a poker game or basketball with the guys for him, a book group with women friends for her, and a myriad of other activities can enhance life and needn't be given up with marriage. Limiting yourself solely to activities that you and your spouse share can stifle too much of who you are and who you can become.

Alas, for many spouses, the hardest part of including both sharing and separateness in their marriage is finding time for either. Leaving work at a reasonable hour makes a big difference. In addition, Louisa and Bill have discovered a number of ways to maximize both their couple connecting and their time-alone moments.

When Louisa and Bill have dishes to do, or laundry to fold, they work together to winnow out extra minutes of talk together time. When the children are around, they connect via hugs, eye connections, smiles, exchanges of comments, and appreciation. In addition, they schedule an hour or more each evening for couple time. They bed children down early enough to insure some time that they can share together every night. They tell the children that its up to them if they want to stay up in their rooms to play or read, but Mom and Dad are Off Duty. They also schedule reverse date-nights. The

grandparents bring their kids to their homes for sleepovers, leaving Louisa and Bill a temporary empty nest they can enjoy together.

To manage to carve out on-their-own times, Bill and Louisa calendar these hours. Louisa dances after work on Monday and Wednesday, with Bill handling the home front. Bill prefers to take his solo hours on Saturday mornings, when his friends are available for tennis and when he can enjoy the cool early morning air for bike trips.

Of course, in being sure each of you has separate times for pursuing what you uniquely enjoy doing, be sure that romance remains solely in the province of your marriage relationship. Spending leisure time, or talking about your personal life, alone with someone of the other sex other than your spouse invites the slippery slopes of jealousies and betrayals, endangering rather than enriching your marriage. That's true with or without sexual infidelity. Share private time in groups or with a same-sex friend. Prevention is the best policy.

In addition to shared and separate times, delineating shared versus separate physical spaces adds to the likelihood that a household will be a happy one. "Our" areas typically include the kitchen, living room, and a bedroom. At the same time, at least a desk, a bureau, a specific comfortable chair, or maybe even a room or more, give each spouse a feeling of "my" space. You can tell what you think of as your personal spaces, not for sharing, by how uncomfortable you feel if your spouse should suddenly act as if that space were joint territory. Do you feel protective? Trespassed upon? Again, a mix of shared places and places that feel personal to each of you signals that you have the ability to sustain partnership and at the same time respect each other's personal boundaries.

*Ours* versus *mine* can raise particular sensitivities in the realm of money. Healthy couples generally find ways to designate three money pools, with one for each individual spouse

to spend as needed, and a third pool for family spending. Each spouse typically will spend money without consulting the other for haircuts, clothes, and other personal as well as family items. But for cars, homes, or other major ticket items, comfortably-connected spouses generally touch base with each other, looking to be sure they have consensus.

In addition, in households where money decisions flow smoothly, each spouse tends to have separate areas of financial responsibility. One spouse, for instance, may pay the bills, and the other handle investments. Too much togetherness on every aspect of money management tends to be less efficient, and make for more struggles, than when each spouse separately tackles specific aspects of the total job. The key there though is openness to influence. If the spouse handling investments, for instance, is open to heeding the concerns of the other spouse, all goes well. If there is too much separateness in the financial realm, by contrast, one spouse can begin to feel excluded or experience the other as overly controlling.

Another important arena for maintaining both sharing and separateness is in the management of your emotional states. If one of you feels sad, anxious, or frustrated, it can be tempting to slip into a victim or dependent stance, expecting your spouse to fix you. Fortunately, your spouse generally does not need to change for you to feel better. Rather, if you are the upset spouse, look to what you yourself can do to remedy the situation. If you get annoyed when your spouse is late for dinners, figure out what you can do differently so that when the dinner bell rings and your partner has not yet arrived, you can handle the situation within your comfort zone.

At the same time, mature spouses do respond to their partner's concerns. If you are the one who tends to come home late, and your spouse is asking that you return for dinner when you say you will, pay attention. Figure out how you go astray and how to remedy the problem. If

each of you is both responsible for yourself, and responsive to your partner, that's separateness and sharing at its best.

Family therapists call a marriage with too much connecting an *enmeshed* marriage. Too much caring about one another can lead to criticism, micromanaging each other, and interference in each others' life spaces. No one feels good when a spouse tells them what to do. "You should . . . ." "Stop telling me what to do!" Invasive over-connection signals you need to reclarify your personal boundaries. It's up to each of you to control yourselves, not each other.

. On the other hand, insufficient connection leads to a *disengaged* relationship. Too little involvement in each other's lives can leave spouses feeling unattached, unsupported, and even stranded. Spouses need to feel that their partner does care about what they do and feel, and that their partner is in fact sharing the business and pleasures of living with them. Focusing more on each other by taking time to really see and hear each other, and increasing the time, space, and especially the quantity of talking together and sexual intimacy that you share, can revitalize your connection.

How else can you tell if you have enough togetherness, and enough separateness, in your marriage? One test—do your dreams include your partner in them? Are you also in your dreams sometimes on your own?

Another test—Notice how attentively you heed those little voices within you, the subtle murmurs that say "I'm feeling disconnected; I need to think about how to carve out time and places for us to be together." Or, "I need my space!"

The moral of the story? Staying two separate people enriches you both, and makes your sharing all the more meaningful. At the same time, sharing time, intimacy, spaces, money and more keeps marriages strong. As a songwriter once said, multiply life by the power of two!