

EXPERIENCE LIFE

DECEMBER 2010 Volume 12, Issue 10 BETTER THAN GOOD



[Life Wisdom Features](#)

The Six Best Gifts You Can Give Your Partner

By Elizabeth Foy Larsen / December 2010

At the beginning of most relationships, tokens of affection — from love letters to iPod playlists to spontaneous weekends away — help cement a couple's sense of connection. But those random acts of infatuation often wane as a relationship matures. Even finding the right gift for birthdays and holidays can start to feel like a chore.

But a gift-giving mentality becomes even more important as a relationship evolves — and some of the very best presents can't be wrapped. They're the thoughts and gestures that come straight from the heart and can transform a good partnership into a truly great one. "One thing that stands out in the research is that the actions you perform are the most important," says Gay Hendricks, PhD, coauthor with his wife, Kathlyn, of [Conscious Loving: The Journey to Co-Commitment](#) (Bantam, 1992). "A lifetime dedication to gift giving will take your relationship to the next level."

Since it's the time of year when presents are on everyone's mind, it's the perfect opportunity to transform your relationship from good to great — or from great to greater — by giving your partner these six very important gifts.

Gift 1: Learn Your Partner's "Love Language"

Each of us wants to feel loved by our partner and wants our partner to feel loved by us. The challenge for many couples, according to Gary Chapman, author of [The 5 Love Languages](#) (Northfield, 2010), is that the way one person shows love often isn't the way his or her partner intuitively feels it.

One person, for example, may experience physical affection as love, while her partner experiences help with the household chores as the ultimate token of affection. They are, in essence, speaking different languages. "These miscommunications aren't a matter of not having good intentions," says Chapman. "They're a matter of not touching the heart or emotions of the other person."

Most of us grow up learning the emotional language of our parents, he explains. And we become confused and upset when our partner doesn't understand us.

To get past those miscues, Chapman advises couples to identify what he calls their "love languages" and share them with each other. If you're not sure which of the following five languages best describes you, take Chapman's Love Language Quiz to figure out your type (see page 59 for the link). He also suggests asking yourself what you most often demand of your spouse. "The thing you have most often requested is likely the thing that would make you feel the most loved," he notes. Here are Chapman's five love languages:

- **Words of Affirmation.** Some people experience love most directly through warm words, whether they're verbal compliments or encouragements — anything from "I appreciate that you found a babysitter for tonight" to "I know you can run that 10K!" Whether or not words of affirmation are your primary love language, research suggests that supportive comments help couples develop a sense of "we-ness," a feeling that enhances satisfaction with one's partnership.
- **Quality Time.** If this is your primary love language, you want your partner's undivided attention. It's important to you to have time together without distractions where you can nurture conversations and enjoy activities together. Quality time, according to Chapman, helps couples build reserves of positive memories, which are linked to increased marital stability and satisfaction.
- **Receiving Gifts.** Actual presents have their place on the spectrum of relationship gift giving, too. The key to speaking this love language, however, has nothing to do with the price tag — it's all about making your partner feel understood. This could be a store-bought bracelet or a beautiful rock you pick up on a hike or a watercolor you paint. These kinds of gifts demonstrate that you've been paying attention, and that you really see who your partner is and what she loves.
- **Acts of Service.** This love language emphasizes doing things you know your partner would like you to do, from making dinner to changing the cat's litter to paying the bills. These acts show your partner that you notice what's going on in his life and want to help him.
- **Physical Touch.** Backrubs, holding hands, deep hugs, kisses, putting your arm around your partner — for some people, physical intimacy is the signal of love and affection. If your primary love language is physical touch, nothing will say "I love you" more than being held or touched.

Gift 2: Pursue Passion

Passion often gets sidelined as a marriage becomes more established, but there are far-ranging benefits to bringing it back, says clinical psychologist David Schnarch, PhD, author of *Intimacy & Desire: Awaken the Passion in Your Marriage* (Beaufort Books, 2009). For starters, tapping into passion helps us discover more about who we are, which allows us to share more of ourselves with our partner. "When we are the object of our partner's passion, it makes us feel desirable and desirous," says Schnarch.

Passion also improves relationships by making people more tolerant of one another. "When we think our partner likes us, we are much more forgiving of grievances, and we're also more tolerant of the inherent nicks and bruises of being in a relationship," he adds.

Good sex has other benefits, too. Orgasm increases levels of oxytocin, a hormone that boosts feelings of connection and trust. Higher oxytocin levels have also been linked to increased feelings of generosity, reduced stress and improved cardiovascular health. And sex increases self-esteem; a five-year study at the University of Texas found that one of the reasons people have sex is to boost feelings of positive self-regard.

If passion is in short supply in your life, Schnarch recommends these simple strategies:

- **Hugging to Relax.** Most hugs last an average of four seconds, says Schnarch. Extending a hug to 10 minutes without the pressure that it should lead to sex can be a way to reconnect with your partner. "The focus of a 10-minute hug isn't about holding your partner," he explains. "It's about putting your arms around your partner and calming yourself down. This calms the anxieties that separate people."
- **Heads on Pillow.** For many couples, it's tough to transition from washing the dishes to rolling around in the sheets. That's why Schnarch advises partners to lie in bed with their clothes on and face each other with enough distance so that you can clearly see each other's faces. "Hold hands, look at each other, and stay there for 10 minutes," he advises. Most people feel passion start to kick in when they're relaxed and lying down.
- **Feeling While Touching.** Many couples develop the habit of touching each other without really feeling each other. "It's very irritating to be touched by a partner when their touch feels mindless, like your partner is not invested and you are being taken for granted," Schnarch says.

Bring passion back to touch by connecting emotionally as well as physically. You can do this by having each partner tune in to what touching feels like. He suggests taking turns deliberately touching your partner and noticing how it feels to touch and be touched. Do this experiment once when each person is tuned in to the experience and once when each person is tuned out. This helps both people understand the importance of really being in the moment, he says.

When both people focus on the same spot at the same time on opposite sides of the skin, it creates an electric sensation that is the byproduct of emotional attention.”

Gift 3: Allow Space for Solitude

When author Laura Munson and her husband got married, their ceremony included a quote from the poet Rainier Maria Rilke, which read, in part: “A good marriage is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of his solitude, and thus they show each other the greatest possible trust.” Almost two decades of marriage and two children later, Munson’s husband began to have doubts about the marriage. But instead of begging him to stay, Munson took Rilke’s quote to heart and gave her husband the emotional space she felt he needed to reflect and reconnect with himself.

During an especially difficult stretch where her husband took up residence in another part of the house, Munson focused on what she knew in her heart: that she and her husband had a solid, loving bond that could transcend his personal crisis. “If a person needs to reconnect with who they are, the greatest gift a partner can give is the gift of space,” she says. “It’s a refueling time.” Today, Munson’s bond with her husband is stronger than ever.

Munson’s story, which she recounts in her memoir, [*This Is Not The Story You Think It Is: A Season Of Unlikely Happiness*](#) (Amy Einhorn/Putnam, 2010), is a dramatic example of how powerful the gift of solitude can be. Giving your partner the gift of time not only helps repair relationships, as with Munson’s, but it can transform them from good to great. Time apart — whether it’s a night out with friends, a quiet morning alone or a solo weekend away — helps your partner get in touch with her needs, interests and priorities. And it allows her to more authentically share them with you.

Gift 4: Don’t Skimp on Time Together

Some solitude is healthy, but as with all things, balance is key. Too much can weaken a relationship by creating separate spheres of interest, which can lead to couples having less and less in common over time. After all, we tend to fall — and stay — in love with the person we have the most fun with. That’s why relationship expert Willard F. Harley Jr., PhD, advises couples to do the things they enjoy the most together. “Couples who spend their most enjoyable time together tend to have great marriages,” he says.

Giving each other the gift of what Harley calls “recreational companionship” benefits both giver and receiver by combining two important human needs: to have fun and to have a companion. Harley recommends spending most, if not all, of your recreational time with your significant other. Stumped about what to do together? To jump-start your imagination — and recreation — he developed the Recreational Enjoyment Inventory at www.marriagebuilders.com. It’s an extensive list of activities — from archery and astronomy to cribbage, croquet and gardening. Each partner ranks each activity based on his or her level of interest. When both people give an activity a high score, it’s one worth trying.

Gift 5: Crack Down on Criticism

Nothing can sink a relationship faster than unrelenting negativity, says marriage researcher John Gottman, PhD, author of [*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*](#) (Three Rivers, 2000). In his research at the University of Washington’s “Love Lab,” Gottman has found that successful relationships have a 5-to-1 ratio of positive interactions — compliments, loving glances, offers to help out — to negative gestures such as criticism and nagging.

Whether you nag or simply turn your back when your partner is talking, these negative gestures erode your sense of togetherness. Researchers have even found that eye rolling after a spouse’s comment can be a strong predictor for divorce.

To bring your interaction ratio in line with Gottman’s recommendation, try to become more aware of how often you’re criticizing your spouse. One way to do this is to create some kind of lighthearted stopgap when you notice critical commentary — put a coin in a jar, or create a silly code word to let your partner know you’ve caught yourself (or her)

in the act. Then try consciously focusing on each other's strengths instead. Criticism will be naturally tamped down, and that will give each of you more opportunities to feel successful, appreciated and loved.

Accentuating the positive in your relationship doesn't mean you should ignore tough issues. It's just that you need to do it in an environment that's fortified with positive feelings and exchanges.

"There's a big difference between asking for change and criticizing," says psychologist Noelle Nelson, PhD, author of [*Your Man Is Wonderful*](#) (Free Press, 2009). "If what you want is more participation with the kids or the house, that's fine. But you need to start out from the perspective that you respect your partner, and his way of doing things is as valid as yours."

Gift 6: Actively Listen to Your Partner

During the courtship and honeymoon phase, it's easy to hang on your lover's every word. "Being listened to in childhood develops our sense of self and is how we know we are important, and the same is true for adults," says psychologist Jan Hoistad, PhD, author of the Big Picture Partnering blog and the book [*Romance Rehab: 10 Steps to Rescue Your Relationship*](#) (Sterling, 2010).

Unfortunately, when couples are together for a long time, it's common to become less attentive — but with a little practice, you can renew your capacity for rapt listening. Hoistad suggests taking turns actively talking and listening at least four times a week for 20 to 30 minutes. Alternate which of you goes first and talk about something important to you, excluding well-traveled topics and hot-button issues as much as possible.

Be honest, but don't just focus on what's bringing you down. Hoistad recommends sharing personal successes and things you find exciting, rewarding and worth celebrating. Then, when it's your partner's turn, actively listen to what he or she has to say without interrupting. What's most important, Hoistad says, is to listen with a readiness to give and take. "When we're generous with others it creates such nice feelings," she says. "And then the other person naturally starts giving back."

Elizabeth Foy Larsen is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer whose work has appeared in numerous national publications, including Mother Jones, Parents and the Los Angeles Times.