

Survivor's Guide for the Working Couple

Part 1

Luke De Sadeleer
The Couples Coach®

Imagine two loving partners arriving home at about the same time.

They are returning to what they hope will be a safe haven after experiencing a very difficult day at work. Both are feeling emotionally depleted and rather grumpy, and subconsciously hoping that their partner will help to get them out of their slump.

I'm sure most of you readers are familiar with this scenario and already recalling those times when you were disappointed and left with unfulfilled expectations. Let's face it, most couples get together in the hope that their partner will nurture and care for them during those times when they are not able to nurture themselves. In fact, it has been well accepted within the therapeutic community that often we are trying to find someone to love us because we are needy. We are needy because we did not get enough of this love when we were young. As a result, when we feel emotionally depleted, we rely on our intimate partner to give us what our parents could not supply. We actually expect our intimate partner to be a surrogate parent, so that they can give us what we did not get as children. Unfortunately, at this time of need we often find ourselves in a situation where our partner is also experiencing the same strong desire for some nurturing.

So what can we do? Well, one of the answers lies in caring for the child within. Accept that there is one in every one of us, a part that still feels like a child—a child with wants and desires that need to be nourished just as surely as those of our own children. Reflect on your own childhood and determine what kind of caring and nurturing you received as you were growing up. In my experience, as a

psychotherapist, I am aware that not many of us can lay claim to having had the kind of parents who had the ability to nurture and care for us without conditions. As a result, most of us had to learn to develop the ability to love and care for not only someone else but ourselves, as well. Jess Lair, in his book *I Ain't Much, Baby-But I'm All I've Got*, describes the fate of most of us when he says, "My God, I didn't get the love that I needed.... You're screaming at me for love and, hell, I haven't got anything to give you. I'm so dying to be held and loved and stroked and caressed that I cannot stand it. And yet I'm supposed to give you something that I never got anywhere near enough of. I don't know how to give it."

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So, is there hope for those of us who never got enough? The answer is "Yes!" I believe that all of us have some capacity to love. We just need to build on the capacity we have. Even if we start with caring just a little, we will get back a little. So you see, I am not suggesting that only individuals who have overcome dependency, and have the ability to give unconditionally, should enter into a loving relationship. In fact, I am suggesting that a nurturing and caring relationship will contribute to the growth and development of the individuals in the relationship. The responsibility for growth, however, lies with each individual.

Whenever I give a speech about healthy relationships, I remind the audience that "if you want love in your life, you have to be able to give it to yourself first." Meaning that we need to develop the skill to nurture ourselves. The prob-

lem arises when our inner child feels deprived, and we are not aware of it. Let's say you still crave the nurturing you never got as a young child. If you keep this desire hidden from yourself, you may just pretend that you don't need it, and play out the "tough independent guy" role. Or you may be very demanding of your partner, expecting him or her to satisfy your craving for attention. In either case you have a problem. It may be rather difficult for you to provide nurturing to your partner when you yourself are so needy. The danger is that your unreasonable demands and self-defeating behavior may drive away the very person you desire.

The answer, again, lies in healing yourself. Begin by accepting your own

deprived inner child and nurturing yourself. Do not expect your partner to fill the void that exists within you. A loving partner can be supportive, but only you can satisfy your longing. Learn how to love yourself, and let yourself be loved. Accept that you have a need to be loved that will probably never be fully satisfied. However, together as intimate partners, you can help each other to become more loving and giving.

A loving relationship is one that promotes individual growth and the capacity to care. 

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Part 2

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I imagine for a moment that you are preparing to have a relaxing and enjoyable evening with your partner.

You have arrived home from work before your intimate partner, and have decided to really please her by preparing her favorite meal. You bought some flowers and put on that shirt she really likes. The anticipation of her arrival is growing. You hear her car drive up, so you stop what you're doing and go to the door to greet her. As you open the door you notice something is wrong. She slams the car door and has a look on her face that is anything but pleasant. She storms past you, grumbling something about "those idiots at work!" What do you do?

Well, for starters, I would not suggest you criticize her for being in a bad mood, saying something like, "You just ruined the wonderful evening I had planned for us." Unfortunately, if you have ever been in this situation, and most of us have, that's probably what came out of your mouth.

So what can you do to salvage the evening? Well I have a suggestion. Stop behaving like a critical parent and do what you can to give your partner some support and nurturing. I realize that may be hard to do when you are feeling disappointed and in need of some recognition yourself, especially after all the effort you put into this evening.

Building on what I said In Part 1 of this series, concerning caring for the child within, here is something else you can do. Begin by remembering that old adage, "Give and you shall receive." This is a case that can test the validity of this saying.

You know she's had a rough day, so more than likely the little child inside her could really use some attention not critical attention, but the kind of nurturing that soothes and replenishes. After all, you put a lot of effort into preparing for a relaxing and enjoyable evening; just a little more effort isn't going to hurt. Understand that some genuine caring right now would really be appreciated by her. So appreciated, in fact, that most likely her bad mood will begin to disappear, and after a short time her inner child will probably want to enjoy the evening, as well. She may even want to play. Believe me, that's when the real fun begins.

What I am suggesting is that you pay particular attention to what you do and say during the first few minutes when you meet and greet your partner. This is

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very important, as it will set the tone for the rest of the evening. Using a nurturing and supportive approach in your greeting will result in a better outcome.


It may also be important for you to change your regular routine. Too often we are busily involved in some activity and we ignore our partner when they walk through the door. Or we are the one who walks in and immediately gets busy sorting out the mail or checking the e-mail. We haven't seen each other for hours and what do we do? We pay more attention to "things" than we do to the living and breathing person with whom we share our lives. When we do that, we create a distance that isolates us from our partner. And then we wonder why we feel ignored and alone.

Whenever you feel ignored and alone, it is important to remember that you are

responsible for your own happiness. You have taught your partner how to treat you. So take the initiative, change your predictable routine and do something unexpected. Instead of ignoring your partner and asking the usual superficial, "How was your day?" while still continuing your activity, you might want to try the following steps:

1. Stop whatever it is you're doing and make eye contact with your partner.
2. Give your partner a long and passionate kiss. Not just a peck on the cheek or a quick brush on the lips, but a slow, lingering kiss.
3. Concentrate on each other, and take turns sharing your day.

The total amount of time may be no more than a few minutes, but it will create an atmosphere of closeness that may

last for the entire evening. Invest a little bit of your time; the return will be well worth it. What you are doing in those first few minutes is creating a good first impression. And we all know the saying, "You never have a second chance to make a good first impression." Those first few precious minutes are all it takes to create the mood and the atmosphere. So take responsibility for how you are treated by your partner, and turn that response into one that you will both savour and enjoy. Imagine the results if you both were to use this creative first impression. 

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