

Seven Keys to Lasting Connection

By Melody Brooke, MA, LPC, LMFT

It doesn't matter how excited you are about your partner if you can't stay on the same wavelength and keep a connection over time. Finding the right person is really less than half of what it takes to stay connected with someone. In working with couples and families over the past 18 years it has become clear to me that being in love, or even just loving someone, isn't enough to keep the relationship going.

To maintain that magical feeling of love and special-ness in a relationship we have to be willing to take 150% ownership of the quality of the connection in our relationships. There are certain things we have to be willing to do and to continue doing if it is our intention to stay in love and in connection with our chosen partner.

The exciting thing is that it doesn't matter if your relationship is only 6 months old or if its 20 years old, these things will work to deepen your connection. And, you don't have to wait for the other person to do them, it's not about what the other person does or doesn't do. It's about you deciding that you want to maintain that connection, and being willing to take that 150% ownership.

So here we go:

- 1) **Love is an action:** Show your partner how you feel about them every day, at least once a day. Do this even if you are in different states or countries. Show your care don't just speak it. Saying "I love you" doesn't deepen a connection unless it's accompanied by actions. Leave love notes under your partner's pillow when you are going to be out of town. Make sure the tires in his car have enough air in them before he leaves town. Hug her every time she walks in the door. Think to get her favorite flower once in a while, for no reason. Fix the leak in the bathroom he's been complaining about. Wipe up the counter and pick up after yourself like she has been asking.
- 2) **We are all kids at heart:** Recognize that no matter how grown up your partner seems, they are really a little kid inside. (Oh yes, and so are you) We are all really just kids that have bodies that have aged. Inside all of us are the unmet needs of our childhood as well as the playful spontaneous joyful child that we once were. Throughout the time you spend with your partner, see if you can notice the kid inside them. Respond to that kid just as you would to a kid who has not yet grown older.
- 3) **Bedtime sharing:** If you live together, go to bed at the same time, together, every night. This is huge. That means turning off the TV, the night-light and the phone. This is your time together. Cuddle and talk, make love if the urge strikes but that is not the point. The point is to talk about your day, your worries, and your hopes. Discover that in spite of all the time you have spent together, you still don't know

each other. If you don't live together, or are not together for whatever reason, talk on the phone after you climb into bed.

- 4) **Don't let things slide:** When your partner says or does something you don't agree with or that upsets you, tell them. Don't just let it slide. This doesn't mean making a mountain out of molehill, but be sure to give things that upset you the energy that they deserve. Pretending that something doesn't matter doesn't make it not matter. You may think it's not important but over time these things add up and cause resentments and distance. You may not always have time to process the conflict at that moment, but at least let your partner know that you are having a problem and that you will need to discuss it later. When you go to bed together that night, discuss it, if you haven't already.
- 5) **You are not enemies:** When you are in a conflict with your partner stop your arguing for a moment. Breathe deeply. Start thinking about what you love about this person, and what you are grateful for about them. Then remember that they are not your enemy. In the middle of a conflict it sure can feel that way. It can seem that they are attacking you and you are the victim. Instead of arguing your case back to them, listen to what they are saying and, more importantly, what they are feeling. Respond to what they are feeling. Own what you can about your part in whatever has upset them, this doesn't mean agreeing with them, only that you can see that you have done something that upset them.
- 6) **Touch well, touch often:** Touch your partner as often as possible, and get them to touch you as often as possible. Skin to skin contact increases a hormone called oxytocin, the hormone of love. Oxytocin increases trust and a sense of safety; it reduces stress and increases sexual arousal. Most men and many women are touch deprived. In many cultures parents are taught not to "baby" their children and they interpret this as not cuddling them. Touch increases our overall sense of well being.
- 7) **Play together.** Be playful in your interactions. Have a sense of humor in times of stress. Find something playful to do that you both enjoy and make it a priority to keep it in your schedule. Play is critical to our sense of connection to others, and to our joy in life. In our culture we tend to get so serious and think that if an activity is not goal directed it has no purpose or meaning. Yet play expands our ability to think, develops creativity and gives us a sense of joy. Playing together in both structured and unstructured ways develops trust and engenders caring.

Staying connected requires time a commitment to the relationship. If you are willing to do all seven of these things, your relationship will flourish Even if you just do a few of them your relationship will fare better than many, certainly than those who first walk through the door of my counseling office.

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