

Beyond Candy & Flowers Everyday Romance

BY SHANNON MARTIN

"It is a full time job being honest one moment at a time, remembering to love, to honor, to respect. It is a practice, a discipline, worthy of every moment." *Jasmine Guy*

We celebrate romance on Valentine's Day, but this quote reminds us that love and relationships are an ongoing "discipline", something we need to work at and celebrate with more than just candy, flowers, and jewelry on one day. Bibiana Rueda-Bueno and Paula van Grieken Ferrer, psychologists at Body & Soul-Medical Clinics, sat down with me to share their advice for keeping relationships healthy all year round.

WHAT COMMON RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS DO PEOPLE COME TO YOU FOR, HERE IN SHANGHAI?

Common issues include infidelity, communication problems and issues regarding the individual's personal path. We often see people expecting the relationship to feed all of their individual needs.

Relocation may exacerbate problems or cause new strains in the relationship. When one person moves abroad for a spouse's job, he/she may feel isolated and sad because of the changes. Within the social circle, some relationships may be shallow, with less long-term friendships for support and more approval seeking. Coming to a new place and dealing with so many changes can highlight insecurities and be difficult for those who need to feel in control.

WHAT TIPS CAN YOU GIVE FOR KEEPING OUR RELATIONSHIPS HEALTHY EVERY DAY?

It's simple but completely necessary to be aware of our inner and outer dialogue. How do you ask for your needs? Do you say "you must" or imply "it's your duty to please me"?

The orientation to any issue should be positive. Problems that arise are new challenges that might improve the relationship. Define the problem, look for possible alternatives to solve it and implement them every day.

Each member of the couple should remember it is his/her own duty to fulfill themselves, to be happy and to find his/her purpose. The partner is sharing the path; he or she doesn't have the task to give you all the things you cannot find yourself.

The best way to increase a behavior is to reinforce it when it appears, so increase the positive interaction and decrease the negative.

Remember that although being a parent is the most beautiful experience ever, it's just a role and you're allowed to have many roles. Sometimes, if you identify too much with one role, you forget to fulfill other aspects of your life.

Work to avoid taking things personally and making assumptions. Sometimes "in the couple" we suffer because we get attached to our thoughts and forget the facts. Usually our assumptions are just negative ideas not related at all with the fact e.g. you didn't call me, assumption – you don't love me.

WHAT CAN WE DO THIS VALENTINE'S DAY AND BEYOND TO REINVIGORATE THE RELATIONSHIP?

Talk about what you each expect from each other or from the relationship and try to be as specific as you can.

Remember you are an emotional, physical, sexual, and mental being. Plan pleasant activities together, nourishing every aspect of yourself.

Get out of your comfort zone. Doing the same "magazine tips" doesn't work for everyone and becomes repetitive. Try something new, maybe something challenging, just for the pleasure of doing it, without any particular expectation.

Good communication is not only about expressing your thoughts, but also your emotions. Remember the best tool to use with your partner is active listening and empathy.

HOW DO YOU WORK WITH COUPLES EXPERIENCING RELATIONSHIP CONCERNS?

The benefits of couples-counseling is to realize your own path and all those things that you need to address personally, in order not to give them as a burden to your partner. It also gives you healthier communication skills, the possibility to be mindful in the present moment and to create a balanced partnership.

Paula: I mainly work with communication patterns and toxic behaviors. I help people to identify the problems; many of the problems follow the same pattern. Then I look for the best way to solve the conflict and implement the changes in daily life. I also work on improving communication skills by role playing and behavioral trials.

Bibiana: My approach is integral. According to our family tree, we inherit ideas, beliefs and behaviors just in order to "belong" to our family, and later we end up repeating those behaviors within the couple. We use the family tree (gathering information about the family background) in order to be aware of the patterns, identify them and then connect this information with your daily life. With mindful awareness, you can work on those patterns and embrace a healthy relationship with yourself first and then with your partner. 🍷

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