

Staying in Love

By George M. Prince

Staying in love is, perhaps, the greatest challenge in your relationship. Statistics show that it is very difficult—50% of both first and second marriages end in divorce. The real situation is even worse in terms of satisfying lives, because a substantial number of people stay together after love has gone.

If I were forced to explain, in one word, why this sad, love depleted situation exists, I would say that the one word is: spontaneous.

The dictionary tells me that spontaneous means, “arising from impulse... growing without cultivation or human labor”. And, it certainly feels like that when it happens. But the records show that love does not grow without cultivation and human labor. The more than 50% of us who depend upon spontaneity—pay the price in divorce.

The truth is not complicated...it is just hard to grasp and keep in one's awareness. Love is a relationship. This is not hard to understand. What is more difficult to really comprehend is that every relationship is an entity. It is like a separate 'person'. It is made up of all the interactions between the members of the relationship. This relationship remembers and influences how every future communication is interpreted.

To make it even more demanding, love changes as it grows. It goes through phases,, just like a person. We are not surprised that an infant, child, adolescent or adult require from us different treatment, and we quickly develop the necessary skills to interact with them. We should not be surprised that falling in love, being in love, and long-time love require, if we are to be successful lovers, that we create new, more appropriate understandings, skills , and practices to enhance our love in every phase.

Drawing upon the wise women and men who have studied love, we know that love is big! It does not have a singular meaning, for example: *tender love, passionate love, romantic love, true love, pure love, spiritual love, lust, eros, and sexual love* all have discrete meanings.

Love is big in complexity—far more complex than sadness, anger, fear, pleasure, pride or joy. But we know enough to identify some specific ways to make love stay if we focus on our experience and our awareness, and do not depend upon our love to maintain itself without our informed effort.

Falling in Love

If we think of the process of falling in love as an act of imagination, we will better understand how critical is the 'informed effort' we contribute. We are stirred by feelings we first experienced and learned in Mother's and Father's arms. The 'falling' happens

as we create connections with the powerful remembered feelings from long ago. We develop new and deeper capacities for feeling. We imagine how life will be with this partner. We people our hopes, wishes and dreams with this new person.

Part of the 'work' of this period is focusing on, and appreciating the many facets of the loved one that speak so strongly to us. In a real sense, we invent a new life with this idealized image of the beloved. This loving image will play an important role throughout our relationship, as life becomes increasingly affected by realistic concerns.

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Reciprocity—the mutual exchange of courtesies and attention—is essential to create the full intensity of falling in love. Falling in love, inventing new ways of relating, and glorying in this new dimension of being alive, gradually tapers off in intensity, but being in love can be long term if both partners learn and apply the skills of loving.

Staying in love is the product of two ongoing, hidden mental activities: assessment of the partner (appraisal) and granting cooperation (bestowal).

We often assume that our partner constantly loves us. But a partner notices the other's behavior, interprets it, and decides whether or not to love. When my appraisal of my partner's action is negative, I go defensive and distance myself. When I appraise positively, I bestow cooperation, affection and enjoy the partner. This appraisal is continuous.

The Staying in Love Skills

Dr. John Gottman spent thirty years researching couples in action. He observed and studied videotapes and coordinated physiological data (to measure impact) as they dealt with everyday as well as critical issues. He identified the actions that make love stay, and those that drive partners to defend and distance themselves. He identified six actions that impact every relationship negatively. In ascending order of seriousness: *criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, and belligerence*—and I would add a sixth, failure to keep agreements..

Gottman discovered, in his research, that if there were more than one of these negative actions for every five positive, appreciative actions, the relationship would become negative and become unstable. He calls an unstable relationship one with a negative sentiment override—an interpersonal field where one is likely to interpret nearly any action as negative and respond with defensiveness yourself. In contrast, where there are more than five positive interactions, you create a positive sentiment override—an interpersonal field where nearly every action is interpreted as positive. You respond with warmth, openness, and availability.

So, the truth, and the secret of staying in love, is to take great care in the interactions—every communication, every word, gesture, expression, touch, agreement, every action involving your lover and you— registers and is remembered by this entity

that is your love. There is an old saying (a rather course one!) that explains how to insure great lovemaking: foreplay begins right after the last orgasm.

You can understand why staying in love is an ongoing developmental task—and a demanding one.

We get the idea that love is spontaneous because falling in love seems to happen without much planning or studied application on our parts. It is described in song and story as: earthshaking, trance-like, struck by lightening, beguiling, amazing, rapturous, exultation, enchantment.

And, since all of us here have been there, we know that that marvelous feeling carries a powerful promise of being too strong and too totally absorbing not to be long-lasting. It is convincing. And most of us are easily persuaded that love is spontaneous—it grows and maintains itself without us having to do anything much but give in to it!

But now we know that our love is this entity that exists in and between us. Whenever I am with you, or think of you, this entity influences me with all that has happened between us. Pretty scary isn't it? It makes it clear that both of us need to be careful of each other and develop new skills designed to protect our love and help it grow; it is anything but spontaneous. Many positive actions may be impulsive, but they are not without thought.

When you accept the responsibility of love...

You promise to honor your partner. The first meaning of honor is high respect. This requires that in good times and bad, you are wholly available to interact in good faith. It may take a while to cool down and revisit the wonderful qualities that so profoundly attracted you in the first place, so you can be in the frame of mind to problem solve on the issue. It is very helpful to have a problem solving 'ritual'. An agreed upon word or phrase that signals that we should get into a problem solving frame of mind. For example, "I have an issue with you." and then, using "I" language describe the issue. Your partner, by agreement, does the same, dealing with the issue from his point of view. When you are too angry or upset to be rational, say so, and postpone the problem solving until you are calmed down.

An important part of the labor of love is dealing with the disappointments about our partner's styles, capacities, and ways of interacting with us. This labor is done partly alone, and partly together. The alone work has two elements: one is to focus on the loveable aspects, great and small, of your lover. It more important than most people realize, that you are often mindful and appreciative of the good qualities that have stirred love from the beginning to the present, ignoring the problems. Two is to consciously review and refresh your awareness of your own actions with your partner.

A second, large part of the work, as suggested above, is managing one's actions and reactions to make sure they add to the positive side of the field. A crucial to be aware of is that what matters is your partner's *interpretation* of what you say and do. You are doing your job right when your partner interprets your action as meaning, "I am loved and cared for".

Is love worth it? As Willard Gaylin, who wrote *Rediscovering Love*, says: "Love is not the icing on the cake; it *is* the cake"

References:

Gottman, John, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last*, Fireside, (June 1995)
Gaylin, Willard, *Feelings*, Ballantine Books; ; (June 1980)