

Relationships. Make them Last

By Mary Scott Bellgraph Peninsula News

What is the best Valentine's Day gift you could receive? Diamonds? A dozen red roses in a crystal vase? According to the National Retail Federation's "Valentine's Day Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey," conducted by BIGresearch, Valentine's Day spending is expected to reach \$16.9 billion. But once the diamond loses its luster and the petals fall from the roses, will the relationship still be blooming?

What if the best gift you could give your partner is, well, you? A relationship rich with love, respect and patience is priceless.

Valentine's Day is a good reminder for couples to check on their relationship, says Greg Allen, a Palos Verdes Estates-based marriage and family counselor. "And also to think about what we appreciate about the other person – to do something good for them," he says.

Too often, people dwell on the negative aspects – what isn't and what should be – of a relationship versus looking at all its positive qualities.

"Love," says Allen, "it takes work."

Allen compares relationships to a garden – in the sense that once it's planted, it needs tending. Relationships, like gardens, need nurturing and protection, and occasionally, you have to pull out some weeds. "If you do all these things ... then it will grow and be beautiful – flourishing," he says. "It may sound funny, but you have to look at your partner that way – as something that's growing, potentially growing into something really wonderful and beautiful. So you have to take care of it. You have to tend to it."

People get caught up in work and activities, and they don't take care of their relationships. Many couples, says Allen, are mistaken by thinking that their

relationships have gone bad, when really they were just neglected. The divorce rate in California is higher than the marriage rate. Allen says that 85 percent of the couples that break up could have worked out their differences. “What people call irreconcilable, I call giving up,” he says.

Hang in there, Allen says. Love can be rekindled.

“There’s a lot that couples can do to get out of their complacency – like dating each other.”

Find an activity – or do something you used to do when you first started dating – that you both enjoy and go on a date. Don’t talk about problems, bills, children or anything that puts a strain on the relationship. Talk about simple things and enjoy each other’s company. Also, Allen says, try to look at each other as if you don’t already know everything. “If you’ve been in a relationship with somebody, you’ve seen the good, the bad, the ugly, so you think you know everything about them ... You really don’t know everything about the other person,” he says. “If you can see them as more of a mystery, and have more interest in what they think about this or that ... then it creates a little more interest in the relationship.”

For those with kids, finding couple time is difficult. Too often, the kids become the focus and the couple suffers. “That’s a big challenge for married couples with children,” Allen says. “It’s very hard to have an enjoyable marital relationship. A lot of couples forget what that is because they’re focused on work and the kids. The family, the individual couple, doesn’t get a lot of prime time together.”

It’s easier said than done, but schedule time alone.

“Put it on your schedule,” Allen says. “Carve out the time. Cancel other things and [schedule] an hour, two hours, three hours ... [Having time together] used to happen naturally when it was just the two of you, but it doesn’t happen anymore.”

If that sounds too clinical, don’t worry. The romance, the natural desire to be together, soon will follow.

Whether you’re starting the journey into coupledness or you’ve been on the road for some time, there are several key factors to developing and maintaining a

loving, healthy relationship. Respect your partner, and accept him or her for person he or she is – don't try to change anyone. Be honest about your feelings and really listen to the things your partner says to you. Learn to communicate through conflicts, which will arise; know how to apologize and work on yourself. We often look at what others do wrong and forget to reflect on the things we do. Take a self-inventory and learn about you and why you respond to things the way you respond. If you take care of yourself, you'll have more to offer another individual.

“If you want to take a time out, if you feel overwhelmed or really distressed, in despair,” Allen says, “find someone to talk to about your feelings, someone you can really be honest with – like a friend ... A healthy relationship has two individuals that have enjoyable lives going already. And together, it should enhance life.”

On Wednesday, remember that it's not about the roses or diamonds or candy. “The important thing is being together,” says Allen.

Greg Allen has been counseling families, teens and couples for 27 years. He has a private practice in the Malaga Cove Plaza in Palos Verdes Estates and in Hermosa Beach.