

Love is a Verb

I put my heart in action (Verb!)
To run, to go, to get, to give (Verb!)
(You're what's happening)

Schoolhouse Rock – Verb, That's What's Happening

Love is a verb. Successful marriages take work, commitment and a lot of compromise. When it comes to love, what you do is more important than what you say. It's pretty easy to say, "I love you," but taking your wife to the SPCA to adopt cats with her because you know she wants cats puts, "I love you," into action, especially if you are not a cat person. When it comes to showing love, the little, day to day things matter. If your husband is Mr. Tidy Pants and you know that it makes him crazy when you leave your clothes draped over the furniture or wherever else they happen to land, taking an extra minute or two to hang them up or put them in the laundry hamper will speak volumes. (Leaving them on the floor speaks volumes as well – even though it might not be the message you want to send.)

And keep up all those things you did to win your honey's heart. The love notes, the flowers, the special meals, the sensual massages, the passionate sex, and the weekend (or weekday) getaways make them feel important. It's also helpful to just spend time together. Turn off the TV, put down your smart phones, computers, tablets, video games and other distractions and just hang out. Laugh. Talk about your day. Share your dreams and your sorrows. Play cards. Sing together. Cook together. Work in the garden together. Do whatever you enjoy doing together.

Even though actions speak louder, words still matter. It should be obvious that name calling is a recipe for disastrous relationships. There's no rewind button for conversation. Once you've said something mean or hurtful, you can't take it back. Over time, this can destroy your bond. If you are so angry that you want to inflict emotional pain on your wife or husband, take a "time out." The issue might not go away, but at least a "time out" will let the two of you cool down. It's a good idea to set the ground rules for "time outs" when the two of you are getting along. For example, it's helpful to agree that the two of you will come back to the issue later on when you aren't so emotionally charged. And when someone asks for a "time out," respect it. Otherwise, you'll both just continue to say and do things that you'll later regret.

Words can tear love down, but they can also rebuild it. It's often easy to point out what spouses do wrong and take the chores, daily tasks and small things they do for granted. If you want to foster love, show your appreciation for the positive or helpful things your wife or husband does. Thank her when she mows the lawn or makes dinner or cleans the tub. Notice when he puts his dirty clothes in the laundry basket instead of leaving them draped on the lamp or dusts the mantle or sweeps the bathroom.

And if you do have a complaint, do your best not to overgeneralize or criticize. Phrases like, "You never do anything around the house. You're just a lazy pig." are likely to start a fight. But if you focus on the specific issue, acknowledge your feelings ("I feel" instead of "You make me feel.") you're likely to get somewhere. For example, if you say something like, "I feel frustrated. You promised you'd wash the dishes and they are still stacked up in the sink. Would you please wash them soon?" As long as you don't have an angry or whiney tone, your husband or wife is likely to at least listen to what you have to say.

On the other hand, when you do or say something that upsets your partner, own it and apologize, sincerely. Keep it simple, without excuses -- "I was wrong. I shouldn't have said (or done) that. I apologize."

If your reaction was a lot bigger, louder, angrier, or more dramatic than the incident called for, look at what that's about. Charged reactions often stem from an old memory or experience getting triggered and it's important to work through those and release them into the past where they belong. For example, if your husband forgot to pick up milk and you went ballistic or if your wife forgot to tell you she was going to the gym on the way home from work and you spent an hour and a half or longer obsessing that she was having an affair, it's a good idea to explore the possibility that you are reacting to something from the past. Take half an hour or to journal about what came up. Write out the story you made up about what the forgetfulness means. It often comes back to, "He didn't pick up the milk because I don't matter or he doesn't care or he doesn't really love me or he thinks I'm fat, or ..." Remember, just because you think it doesn't make it true. Look at the history of your relationship – the positive memories as well as the negative ones - and weigh your story against the "data." It's also a good idea to ask yourself who this incident reminds you of. Maybe your mother never remembered the things you needed but always seemed to remember what your sister asked for. Maybe your ex cheated on you. If you find who you got reminded of, list three ways your husband or wife is not like that other person.

Don't have to wait on the courts to decide the fate of marriage to infuse your relationship with love. Next time you tell your sweetheart, "I love you," go the extra step and commit to doing something. Express more gratitude and appreciation. Work on changing the habits that are annoying. Take responsibility for the things you do that have been hurtful and apologize sincerely. And work on your emotional baggage that gets in the way.

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