

# How to Stay Connected with Your Partner



By Joy Grimsley, LMFT, Individual, Couple & Family Therapist

You may wake up one day, and have a keen awareness of how disconnected you are with your partner. You may feel especially sad or discouraged about it. Often, it is not a single interaction that left you feeling this way, but an accumulation of many negative interactions over a long period of time.

It probably has a familiar pattern of volatile blow ups, small bickering/criticism, or painful avoidance. I call those negative interactions: **micro-disconnections**. When you look at each negative interaction independently, it's not such a big deal. That is why couples often ignore the need to repair the "little stuff." The problem is our brains have a fabulous ability of remembering emotionally upsetting experiences, and eventually we feel unimportant, unheard, misunderstood, and hurt. The good news is that couples can learn to reduce the emotional pain by paying more attention to the little things that bring them closer. I call those positive interactions: **micro-connections**.

Here are a few thoughts about how to feel connected with your partner:

**Respect** is one of the cornerstones in a healthy and strong relationship. Early in the relationship, you started out well, but over time, you may be focusing on your partner's weaknesses and failures that you find annoying. You may not openly communicate your disrespect, but you do so through your gestures, body language, and tone of voice. Your negative vibe is felt, and if left ignored, can lead to a damaged connection. You may not be able to stay in-love with someone who doesn't respect you and vice versa. One way to show respect for each other is to get better at apologizing and forgiving; two actions that are not always easy to do. They become massive hurdles when emotional or physical infidelity occurs, but for now, let's address the small daily interactions.

**Apologizing and forgiving** are two actions that all of us must accept as essential because we are all flawed. Apologizing does not mean that you're weak and have lost ground. Instead, it's an act of caring and it promotes connectedness. When you apologize for how you delivered a message that injured your partner's feelings, you are making a

micro-connection that tells your partner that he/she matters. You're taking accountability for yourself. If you apologize for what you're doing, your partner's respect for you may go-up a notch. You could say, "Wow, that was really unkind. I apologize. Let me say it in a way that keeps us talking." "My reactions were too extreme, sorry." It's a grave error to skip the apology before going to bed, expecting that time will take care of your offense.

Remember that underneath all your words (or lack of them), you are sending a message about what you think of the person or the relationship. Examples of apologies that are geared towards staying connected are: "I wasn't kind and I apologize. I don't want to feel disconnected with you." or "That was mean of me. Your feelings do matter. I apologize for hurting you." Acknowledging your error promotes forgiveness in the other person.

Forgiving is hard to do, isn't it? Holding onto a grudge satisfies a need to punish someone for their hurtful actions. Letting go of the anger may feel like you're minimizing the hurt you experienced. However, resentment leads to emotional and sexual distancing. It is possible to forgive your partner and still hold him/her accountable because forgiveness is not letting someone off the hook. Challenge yourself to have a realistic view of your partner, and realize that everyone acts out of self-interest at times. A healthy relationship is characterized by being able to bounce back from conflicts and hurts.

While I encourage you to think like a forgiving person, I am acutely aware that some people suffer in silence, and aren't proactive about managing their hurts. You must have a voice because your emotional pain is real. Sharing how you were hurt can be a component of the forgiving process. Instead of defending yourself from an attack, you can say, "When you speak to me like that, I feel like walking away from you... which I don't want to do. Can we repair what just happened?"



Demonstrating respect to each other will foster loving feelings between you two. It will also model what a relationship should look like to your children and friends.

*"Little kindness and courtesies are so important. In relationships, the little things are the big things." - Steven R. Covey*

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