

## Busy Couples Reconnect: 12 Ways to Have More Fun

Date updated: September 01, 2006

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Content provided by Revolution Health Group

Whether they are newlyweds trying to manage jobs and a household for the first time, parents juggling kids' schedules, or empty nesters with lots of activities, most couples feel strapped for time. And even though we know how important our marriages are, often these relationships suffer most from activity deprivation.

Unfortunately, failing to make time for recreational activities together may come at a higher cost than just a few missed dates.

"The lifeblood of a relationship is your spending time together," says Mira Kirshenbaum, a Boston-based psychotherapist and author of *The Weekend Marriage: Abundant Love in a Time-Starved World* (Harmony, 2005). "Without quality time together, the connection between you withers and it becomes increasingly difficult to reconnect."

Couples need three types of time together: close time, relaxed time and fun time, explains Kirshenbaum. "Having fun together is not optional," she says. "No, fun is the glue of intimacy."

Sometimes when couples do find time for recreational activities, though, they feel guilty for having fun without the kids in tow. But Joel D. Block, Ph.D., author of *The Marriage-Work Connection: A Couple's Guide to Balancing Your Life Together* (Citadel, 2006), says parents who don't make one-on-one time a priority are actually doing their kids a disservice.

"[Spending time alone] sends an important message to children: Their parents are a loving team, and they need special time together," he says. "This is a lesson I hope children will take into their own love relationships."

Following are 12 surefire ways to have fun with your significant other.

See a drive-in movie

If you have trouble connecting during the day or have a tight budget, a drive-in movie is a great date. It's cheap, you can bring your own food — and you can see two flicks for the price of one.

Explore yard sales or flea markets

Make a day of discovering new treasures. Create a challenge to see who can score the oldest item, buy the most stuff with a fixed budget or find a trinket with a distinguishing characteristic (for example, one with a particular animal or name printed on it).

Tackle a high-tech project

Take advantage of a cold or rainy day. Bake some cookies or make a big pot of soup and stay in your pajamas all day. If digital photos have been piling up on your hard drive, organize them and put some into albums. Or create a blog or Web page to keep family and friends in the loop (bonus: you'll spend less time keeping everyone up to date and gain more couple time).

### Visit a farmers' market together

Shopping at farmers' markets is a great way to get exercise and fresh air and put a dent in your grocery list.

"We've made a routine out of going to the farmers' market on Saturday mornings," says Bryn Mooth, a Cincinnati-based magazine editor who has been married for 16 years. "It's a way to make grocery shopping more fun — we figure out our dinner plans based on what looks good, we stuff our tote bags full of fresh produce and other ingredients and then we enjoy cooking together in the evening. Most Saturdays, we'll stop for coffee and scones at the market, too, so it gets our weekend off to a great start."

### Sign up for a class

If you're intimidated by the thought of retiling the bathroom or learning to cook, an instructional workshop will give you the confidence and enthusiasm to tackle the task. Plus, doing it together will help turn a chore into a fun, creative project.

### Volunteer for a day

Pitching in at a shelter, working at a community fund-raiser or helping build a Habitat for Humanity home will give you a shared sense of accomplishment and values. And you'll learn a new skill or two.

### Pick your own produce

If you like to get your hands dirty, check out an orchard or farm and pick your own apples, peaches or berries — whatever's in season. As an added perk, you can make a dessert or jam afterward with your hard-earned ingredients.

### Learn more about your city

Most cities have free, self-directed or inexpensive, guided historic and architectural tours. You'll unearth interesting facts about your community, and you might make a few new friends.

"We have to always remind ourselves that we live a few miles from one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country — San Francisco," says Stacey King Gordon, a Bay-area writer who has been married for three years.

"We love to travel but are restricted by budget and time, so sometimes we try to 'play tourist' in our own backyards. Occasionally, when we really feel like we need to get away, we'll book a night at a snazzy hotel in San Francisco, send the dog off to the sitter and pretend we're taking a weekend away."

### Try a new sport

Participating in a physical activity can get both your blood and your romance pumping. Just be sure to pick an activity that doesn't require advanced skills, and make sure you're both rookies. Check out batting cages, driving ranges, rock climbing, ice skating — even miniature golf.

### Pack a picnic and take a hike

If you're having trouble disconnecting from the hustle and bustle of the city, this is the perfect short-term getaway. And if you have a dog, it's great exercise for Fido, too.

Write a letter to yourselves or your child

Hang out at your favorite coffee or ice cream shop and write a letter describing your accomplishments, your hopes and fears or your blue-sky dreams. Plan to open the letter together five, 10 or 20 years in the future — perhaps on a special anniversary.

Or compose the letter for your child and plan to share it on a special birthday or at an important milestone, like a graduation or marriage.

Play games

Dig out your board games or a deck of cards and engage in a little friendly competition. It's easy on the wallet and older kids can join in if you don't have a babysitter.

"My husband and I are both writers, and we've loved to play Scrabble together since we met," Gordon says. "Especially on rainy nights in winter, we pack up the board and head off to our favorite cozy pub or coffee shop to play round after round of Scrabble."

If you're simply too busy to make "date time" this week, block off time to spend together when your loads lighten, then work a few minutes of couple time into each day.

"The latest research indicates that couples need to have one real connection every single day," Kirshenbaum says. "It doesn't have to take more than five minutes. It might be nothing more than a long, sexy kiss — or a few minutes where one of you shares something important and the other really listens.

"But this one real connection every day can keep a relationship alive in the face of the fact that couples today work longer hours and have more outside-of-work obligations than at any time in recent history."

Reviewed by: CME Peer Review

Date reviewed: September 2006

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