



Couples - Everyday grumbles

Work/life balance

Are you finding it difficult to make time for everything in your life? Perhaps it's time to take stock and rearrange your priorities before your personal relationships suffer. Relationship psychotherapist **Paula Hall** explains how.

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Why time's important

The most successful couples are those that make spending time together a priority. Like a plant without water, a relationship without time can wither and die. You need it to share your hopes and dreams, as well as your fears and failings; to keep in touch with what's happening in your lives; and to have fun.

A 2004 survey by the Department of Trade and Industry's Work-Life campaign revealed that eight out of ten employees would love to spend more time with their family and friends. This isn't always easy, but here are some tips to help you achieve a healthier work/life balance.

Book couple time

It may feel a bit formal to make an appointment to see your partner, but if your diaries are really busy this may be the only way to make sure you get some quality time together. It might not seem very romantic, but the results could be!

Start by agreeing how much time you'd like to spend together each week. Some couples choose to book a 20-minute slot every day; others prefer to carve out a bigger chunk once or twice a week.

Make sure you book times to talk, as well as times to crash out together in front of a film.

Quality not quantity

If you've only got a little time together, make sure every second counts. Switch off the TV, prepare a meal together and sit at the table to eat.

And remember, there are lots of ways to keep in touch during the day. Exchange text messages, make phone calls or meet for ten minutes in an internet chatroom.

Increase your timetable

If it isn't possible to fit everything into one week, increase your timetable to a fortnight or even a month. Rather than trying to stick to routines that keep failing, such as having a romantic meal every week, stretch the boundaries.

If you reduce your expectations to something less regular you'll feel far more satisfied when you succeed.

Don't be a perfectionist

When you're very busy it's better to let your standards slip rather than your relationship. If you keep getting down about the amount of dust round the house, invest in some candles - dust hardly shows by candlelight. And rather than spending hours in the kitchen every evening, take advantage of the huge range of convenience foods available.

Let others help

If you're going through a particularly demanding time and you're lucky enough to have people around who are willing to help, let them.

If you have children, let a relative babysit, and pay the neighbours' kids to wash the car or mow the lawn. If you don't have family around, investigate how much it would cost to hire a cleaner for a few hours each week.

Accept your circumstances

There are bound to be periods in your life when you have even less time than normal - when you have very small children, for example, or are caring for an elderly relative.

At times like these, there may be little you can do to change your circumstances. Simply recognising this and knowing that it's just a phase can reduce stress and help you look forward to the future.

Stop doing something

If you've tried everything and yet still don't have enough time as a couple, you may have to stop doing an activity, at least for the time being.

You may decide to postpone an evening class until the children are older, for example, or go to the gym less often. And good friends will understand if you explain that you can't see them as regularly as you once did.

Sacrificing something you enjoy is always difficult, but remember - this is a temporary situation and the reward will be a healthier and more fulfilling relationship.