

The Policy of Undivided Attention

Before you were married, spending time alone with each other was your highest priority. You probably spent the majority of your leisure time together, and the time you spent together was probably the most enjoyable part of every week.

You tried to talk to each other every day. If you couldn't be with each other face-to-face, you talked on the telephone, maybe for hours. And when you were together, you gave each other your undivided attention.

But after marriage, like so many other couples, you may find that you can be in the same room together and yet ignore each other emotionally. What's even worse, you may find that you are not even in the same room together very often, particularly after your children arrived.

One of the more difficult aspects of marriage counseling is scheduling time for it. The counselor must often work evenings and weekends because most couples will not give up work for their appointments. Then the counselor must schedule around a host of evening and weekend activities that take a husband and wife in opposite directions.

But finding time for an appointment seems easy compared to arranging time for the couple to be together to carry out their first assignment. Many couples think that a counselor will solve their problem with weekly conversations in his office. It doesn't occur to them that it's what they do after they leave the office that saves the marriage. To accomplish anything, they must schedule time together -- time to give each other their undivided attention.

It's incredible how many couples have tried to talk me out of their spending more time together. They begin by trying to convince me that it's impossible. Then they go on to the argument that it's impractical. But in the end, they usually agree that without time for undivided attention, they cannot re-create the love they once had for each other.

And that's my point. Unless you and your spouse schedule time each week for undivided attention, it will be impossible to meet each other's most important emotional needs. So to help you and your spouse clear space in your schedule for each other, I encourage you to follow

The Policy of Undivided Attention:
Give your spouse your undivided attention
a minimum of fifteen hours each week,
using the time to meet his or her
most important emotional needs.

This policy will help you avoid one of the most common mistakes -- neglecting each other after marriage. I have tried to clarify this policy for you by offering three corollaries: Privacy, Objectives and Amount.

Corollary 1: Privacy

The time you plan to be together should not include children (who are awake), relatives or friends. Establish privacy so that you are better able to give each other your undivided attention.

It is essential for you as a couple spend time alone. When you have time alone, you have a much greater opportunity to make Love Bank deposits. Without privacy, undivided attention is almost impossible, and without undivided attention, you are not likely to meet some of each other's most important emotional needs.

First, I recommend that you learn to be together without your children. This can be very difficult for many couples, especially when children are very young. They don't think that children interfere with their privacy. To them, an evening with their children is privacy. While they know they can't make love with children around, the presence of children prevents much more than sex. When children are present, they interfere with affection and intimate conversation, two very vital needs in marriage. Besides, affection and intimate conversation usually lead to lovemaking, and without them, you will find that your lovemaking suffers.

Second, I recommend that friends and relatives not be present during your time together. This may mean that after everything has been scheduled, there is little time left for friends and relatives. If that's the case, you're too busy, but at least you will not be sacrificing your love for each other.

Third, I recommend that you understand what giving undivided attention means. It's what you did when you were dating. You probably would not have married if you had ignored each other on dates. You may have parked your car somewhere just to be completely alone, and to rid yourselves of all distractions. That's the quality of undivided attention I'm referring to here.

When you see a movie together, the time you are watching it doesn't count toward your time for undivided attention (unless you behave like the couple who sat in front of my wife and me last week!). It's the same with television and sporting events. You should engage in these recreational activities together, but the time needed for undivided attention is different -- it's the time you pay close attention to each other.

Now that you're alone with each other, what should you do with this time? The second corollary answers that question.

Corollary 2: Objectives

During the time you are together, create activities that will meet the emotional needs of affection, sexual fulfillment, conversation and recreational companionship.

Romance for most men is sex and recreation; for most women it's affection and conversation. When all four come together, men and women alike call it romance and they deposit the most love units possible. That makes these categories somewhat inseparable whenever you spend time together. My advice is to try to combine them all.

After marriage, women often try to get their husband to meet their emotional needs for conversation and affection, without meeting their husband's needs for sex and recreational companionship. Men, on the other hand, want their wives to meet their needs for sex fulfillment and recreational companionship, without meeting their wives needs for affection and conversation. Neither strategy works very well. Women often resent having sex without affection and conversation first, and men resent being conversant and affectionate with no hope for sex or recreation. By combining the fulfillment of all four needs into a single event, however, both spouses have their needs met, and enjoy the entire time together.

A man should never assume that just because he is in bed with his wife, sex is there for the taking. In many marriages, that mistake creates resentment and confusion. Most men eventually learn that if they spend the evening giving their wife their undivided attention, with conversation and affection, sex becomes a very natural and mutually enjoyable way to end the evening.

But there are some women who don't see the connection either. They want their husbands to give them the most attention when there is no possibility for sex. In fact, knowing that affection and intimate conversation often lead a man to wanting sex, they try hardest to be affectionate when they are out in a crowd. That tactic can lead to just as much resentment in a man as nightly sexual "ambushes" create in a woman. Take my word for it, the fulfillment of the four needs of affection, conversation, recreational companionship, and sexual fulfillment is best when they are met together.

Corollary 3: Amount

How much time do you need to sustain the feeling of love for each other? Believe it or not, there really is an answer to this question, and it depends on the health of a marriage. If a couple is deeply in love with each other and find that their marital needs are being met, I have found that about fifteen hours each week of undivided attention is usually enough to sustain their love. When a marriage is this healthy, either it's a new marriage or the couple has already been spending that amount of time with each other throughout their marriage. Without fifteen hours of undivided attention each week, a couple simply can't do what it takes to sustain their feeling of love for each other.

When I apply the fifteen-hour principle to marriages, I usually recommend that the time be evenly distributed throughout the week, two to three hours each day. When time must be bunched up -- all hours only on the weekend -- good results are not as predictable. Spouses need to be emotionally reconnected almost on a daily basis to meet each other's most important emotional needs.

The reason I have so much difficulty getting couples to spend time alone together is that when I first see them for counseling, they are not in love. Their relationship does not do anything for them, and the time spent with each other seems like a total waste at first. But when they spend time together, they learn to re-create the romantic experiences that first nurtured their love relationship. Without that time, they have little hope of restoring the love they once had for each other.

But fifteen hours a week is usually not nearly enough time for couples that are not yet in love. To help them jump-start their relationship, I usually suggest twenty-five or thirty hours a week of undivided attention until they are both in love with each other again.

Your time together is too important to the security of your marriage to neglect. It's more important than time spent doing anything else during the week, including time with your children and your job. Remember that the time you should set aside is only equivalent to a part-time job. It isn't time you don't have; it's time you will use for something less important, if you don't use it for each other.

To help you plan your week with each other's emotional needs in mind, I encourage you to meet with your spouse at 3:30 Sunday afternoon, to look over each other's schedule for the coming week to be sure you have provided time for each other. It's always a good idea to plan a little extra time in case of an emergency that may disrupt your 15 hours.

You have 168 hours every week (24x7) to schedule for something. I highly recommend 8 hours of sleep a night, so that leaves 112 waking hours. Getting ready for the day, and going to bed at night may require, say, 12 hours, and work plus commute may take another 50 hours. That leaves 50 more hours to spend doing what you value most, and 15 of those hours should be dedicated to maintaining a passionate and fulfilling marriage.

If you have not been in the habit of spending 15 hours a week for undivided attention, it will mean that something less important will have to go. But it will radically change your life for the better, because you will be investing in one of the single most important parts of your life -- your relationship with your spouse.

If you're not yet convinced, a Q&A column and an article I've written that may help you understand the importance of undivided attention are, [We Don't Spend Enough Time with Each Other](#), and [Why Women Leave Men](#).

You and your spouse fell in love with each other because you met some of each other's most important emotional needs, and the only way to stay in love is to keep meeting those needs. Even when the feeling of love begins to fade, or when it's gone entirely, it's not necessarily gone for good. It can be recovered whenever you both go back to being an expert at making Love Bank deposits. First, be sure you know what each other's needs are (complete the Emotional Needs Questionnaire). Then, learn to meet those needs in a way that is fulfilling to your spouse, and enjoyable for you, too.

Meeting important emotional needs is only half of the story, however. While that's how couples make the most Love Bank deposits, they must be sure that they're not making Love Bank withdrawals.

The next section introduces several concepts that will help you avoid hurting each other. You'd think that causing pain and suffering would be the last thing a married couple would want to do to each other, yet it's done instinctively and habitually. Unless you protect each other from your destructive habits and instincts, you will hurt each other so much that eventually your Love Bank accounts will be in the red -- you will hate each other.

You have already read quite a bit about making Love Bank deposits, and you may feel as if you have learned enough to put your marriage back on track. But don't stop reading now. The next basic concept is in some ways more important than those I've already introduced to you because if you don't know how to avoid hurting each other, you may not have the opportunity to care for each other. The two go hand-in-hand and without protection, care is impossible. So please read on.

Next Concept:
[Love Busters](#)