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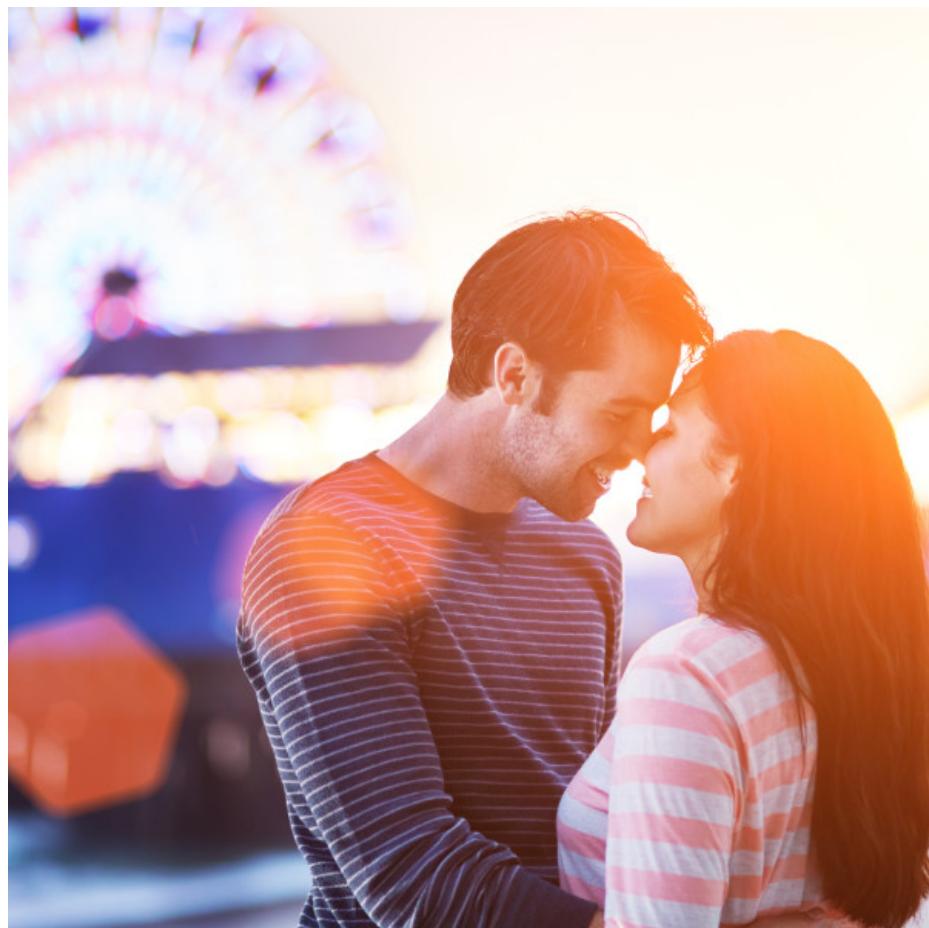
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Relight my fire

By Rebecca Simpson | 3 July 2015

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When you hear a first-time parent-to-be saying, "We won't let this baby change our relationship, what do you think? Do you wonder who she is kidding, or remember the day when you earnestly nodded at that statement, making a silent pact with yourself not to

become one of *those* couples. Either way, there is one thing that all parents have in common – after kids, things will change.

And that's the exact sentence that Dr Ghazi Kaddouh made me write down when I spoke to him about the challenges all marriages and relationships face after kids. "Things will change," he says with a warm and knowing smile. He speaks professionally and personally. He and his wife of 16 years have two kids, and Dr Ghazi is a clinical psychologist at Central Health Medical Practice in Hong Kong. Before that, he was the staff psychologist at Harvard University, and prior to that, Dr Ghazi did his post-doctoral fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley, his alma mater. He has an impressive history and a rousing passion for helping couples and families through their struggles.

Dr Ghazi assures me that post-baby relationship struggles are very common. Thank goodness for that, we can all exhale. I knew this was an important topic when I threw out my regular 'social media-ometer', asking friends and community members to share their experiences and tips on rekindling romance after kids. Generous mums in our community are always willing to share their stories. This time, silence. No one had a positive story to share about rekindling romance. Instead, quite a few people asked me to share my findings.

And so I come bearing gifts. Not a quick fix, because there are no quick fixes, but a few practical suggestions on ways to re-stoke the fire and start to fall in love all over again. Work at your marriage and you'll reap the benefits.



Team sport

Parenting is the longest-running team sport in history. Pregnancy, newborn, infant, the toddler years, primary school, teenager (whatever...), and university student – every stage comes with its own soul-crushing challenges and heart-melting moments for mum-and-dad teams to tackle. The good times will have you high-fiving each other as the ultimate *Gattaca*-inspired makers of superior humans. Everything else will test your relationship, and highlight how different you are. And therein lies the problem.

"At the beginning of a relationship, because we're in love, things usually go smoothly. However,

after having kids, stress, new responsibilities, and varying parenting methods often lead to conflict between partners. Parents need to compromise and work together to be on the same page: adapting their parental style to the unique personality and need of each child,” Dr Ghazi explains, “We each have a way of viewing ourselves and we each have a set of unique values.” The task of parenting and the decisions we face as parents will highlight our differences. And so, we need to actively work on maintaining our love more than ever after our beloved children enter the world.

First, it's important to understand the building blocks of a good relationship. According to Dr Ghazi, it's difficult to build a successful long-term relationship without effective communication, flexibility, and the ability to balance our roles as parents with our needs as a couple and lovers as well. These concepts can easily go out the window as we battle to keep our heads above water with a newborn in the house.

In practical terms, Dr Ghazi says there are three areas on the domestic front we must tend to: our marriage, our family and ourselves. These are three individual buckets that need our devoted attention at different times. You need to spend time alone with yourself, you must spend dedicated time with your partner and, of course, we all know our kids need dedicated family time with Mum, Dad and their siblings. Key to success is flexibility and being devoted to the bucket you are tending to – this is not the time to multi-task. Let me be clear: family time isn't marriage time. Time as a couple, just the two of you, is a must-do. Time alone is essential for a healthy relationship.

Time together

It's a no brainer, but spending dedicated time together as a couple is invaluable. Dr Ghazi says, “We need to spend time together, doing what we used to enjoy before our family got larger. Our energies will be in sync and more harmonious. Imagine a husband coming home after a productive day at work, fantasizing he would take his wife out for a date (he hasn't done that in ages), and he would do this and that. He gets home and, without checking the state his wife is in (because he stopped paying attention a long time ago), he says: ‘Honey, let's go out'; or ‘Love, let's get intimate.' The guy has no idea the things his wife has been doing all day to keep the family and the house functioning. ‘Oh, give me a break,' she responds with a sigh.”

Together Time homework

Cast your mind back to pre-parent days – were you Wednesday regulars at the races? Did you like to run or train together? Were you always checking out the latest restaurants? Or, did you have regular mini-breaks somewhere new, or duck off to recharge in a favourite city for the weekend? Whatever it was, get your diaries out and set a date to enjoy something you know you'll both love.

Try a staycation here in Hong Kong. A night away at a hotel can do wonders for city-lovers, or get off the grid and go camping on Lantau for an evening of cuddling under the stars.



Space: the power of time alone

It might feel counter-intuitive, but nurturing your individual selves and spending time without each other could be the missing link to bringing you back together. This space includes both time to socialize with friends without your partner, and time spent completely alone.

Some couples tend to jump in and try to rescue or fix each other when times are tough, but this can also be a problem. “You need to give your partner space to identify their own needs, to self-soothe and allow emotions to surface,” says Dr Ghazi. “Your partner will go through phases and challenges, give them space.”

Individuality is also key. Couples are made up of two individuals and that sense of identity must remain for the dynamic between you to stay healthy. We all know the importance of being healthy as an individual, to ensure we have enough in our tanks to be our best for the kids and our partner.

Alone time homework

Do a quick individuality audit – when was the last time you both went out with friends solo? Or took yourself to the movies or for a dip at the beach alone? Put this area under the microscope and see if you need to schedule some alone time.

Communication

Effective communication is key, and is often lacking. Back and forth is a common communication style and it's ineffective. Dr Ghazi says if there is one thing couples should do, it's this: learn the art of listening with empathy; truly listening and being heard. And it's harder than you think.

Communication homework

Here is a great little exercise for you to try. Sit down together and set time aside to have an uninterrupted conversation.

Step 1: Person one talks, and person two really listens – no interrupting, no advice-giving, no point-by-point rebuttal, no solutions to be offered. Just listen until the speaker finishes what they have to say.

Step 2: When person one is finished, person two replies with an experience that relates to the information person one just shared. This should not be a direct reply or correction or suggestion to that information, but simply sharing their own feelings and experience.

Step 3: Take turns until both partners feel closure.

Aim to have these empathy listening sessions at least once a week. Better still, have the dialogue on your date night.



Talking about sex

Keeping your channels of communication open about sex is imperative, advises Dr Ghazi. Sex changes after babies, so talk about it to make sure you and your partner are on the same page. Cast your mind back and take inspiration from when you were dating – what did your partner love?

Dr Ghazi implores dads to take the opportunity to stay in bed after sex and reconnect like they did when they were first dating. Jumping straight into the shower interrupts the flow of intimacy and perhaps leaves the wife feeling hurt and unfulfilled. And he also reminds us about the power of a quickie – it can be thrilling and satisfying, and it doesn't take very long.

Intimacy homework

Plan a date night at least once a week. Get excited about having alone time together, eating out and, if the mood calls for it, getting intimate. Research has shown that married couples who engage in more frequent sex tend to be happier.

Flexibility

Success will only be achieved with a flexible approach. Life happens, so roll with the punches. What works and looks do-able this week may not eventuate next week – kids get sick, one-off work emergencies happen, extended family and friends will inevitably need us. Stay flexible but focused and committed.



Rebecca Simpson