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The End of Marital Apathy: Eight Ways to Cultivate Profound Interest in Your Partner (and Why Doing So Is Crucial)

It's easy to get bored inside marriage or any partnered relationship. Yet unchecked apathy is the kiss of death. The authors of the new book Designer Relationships say love depends on "profound interest." Here they offer tips to help you actively and passionately reconnect—even if you thought that ship had long since sailed.

New York, NY (August 2015)—Remember falling in love with your partner? Wasn't there something magical in even the most mundane details of his life story? You were deeply interested in him (and he in you) and it showed. You cooked elaborate meals for him; he bought you little gifts "just because"; you spent hours passionately discussing every topic under the sun (that is, when you weren't passionately doing other things!). Now you barely notice he's in the house, your sex life has dwindled to one ho-hum encounter a month, and when he talks you can feel your eyes glazing over.

Is this complacency—okay, *boredom*—unavoidable after you've been together a while? Or is it a signal that your marriage is in trouble? Mark A. Michaels and Patricia Johnson say the answer to Question One is *no* and the answer to Question Two is *it depends*.

"If you can't or don't rekindle the interest you once had in each other, then yes, you're in trouble," says Michaels, coauthor with Johnson of [*Designer Relationships: A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships*](#) (Cleis Press, September 2015, ISBN: 978-1-627-78147-3, \$15.95, www.michaelsandjohnson.com). "Apathy, not hate, is the opposite of love, and no marriage can survive it. The 'shell' of the relationship may last but there will be no spirit inside it."

"While initial intensity does fade somewhat, the spiral into indifference doesn't *have* to happen," adds Johnson. "The raw materials of a great love relationship are still present. When you deliberately and mindfully make an effort—both in and out of bed—you can again become truly and profoundly interested in your partner. This will keep your relationship fresh and exciting."

The authors say this profound interest takes care of itself in the early stages of a relationship. As time goes on, most people have to cultivate it and consciously make it a part of their partnered interactions. If not, they become bored, restless, and resentful.

Michaels and Johnson have been helping people deepen their intimacy, improve their erotic lives, and incorporate sexual adventuring into their relationships since 1999. Based on these experiences, their own non-exclusive relationship, and many interviews with people in happy partnerships—both monogamous and non-monogamous—the authors are intimately familiar with the skill sets needed to create thriving partnerships, regardless of structure.

It may seem counterintuitive that people who embrace non-monogamy would be so focused on maintaining profound interest in their primary partner. Yet they say practitioners of designer relationships are actually better at this than the rest of us.

“The nature of designer relationships is such that people are compelled to exercise profound interest in each other to a greater degree than those who approach things less consciously,” they write. “Having an awareness that a relationship is dynamic and ever-evolving means that you have to devote a great deal of care and attention to the relationship itself and to your partner(s). It’s much harder to be neglectful if you’re thinking regularly about the relationship and what it means.”

Of course, you don’t have to break the bonds of monogamy to do this. Here, the authors offer a few tips anyone can use to cultivate profound interest in their partner:

When your partner speaks, really listen. (Otherwise, you’re ignoring her bids for connection.) The couples therapist John Gottman uses the phrase “turning toward.” According to Gottman, you should “be aware of bids for connection and turn toward them. The small moments of everyday life are the building blocks of relationships.” Every effort to display profound interest in your partner is at once a bid for connection and an act of turning toward. This can be as simple as taking a few minutes to listen to something your beloved is saying, even if you’d rather be doing something else.

Don’t just sit there silently; that’s merely humoring your partner. Real listening takes a little bit of effort.

“Listening is not just a passive act; you can convey interest by asking sincere questions aimed at understanding whatever your partner is saying,” says Michaels. “If the subject is a difficult one, express your empathy and understanding. Give your partner as much time as is needed to answer.”

Stop the browbeating. Instead, praise each other into embarrassment. If you've been married a while, you're probably pretty good at bringing up the negative, either overtly or in a passive-aggressive way: *You never stay home with the kids when they're sick! Why don't you unload the dishwasher for a change—I can't do everything! I guess you're not going to use the gym membership I bought you for Christmas, huh?* Sound familiar?

Over time, this litany of negativity can seriously damage your relationship. To counteract its effects, the authors suggest you make a mutual effort to bring up the positive instead—even if you have to sit down with pencil and paper and make a list. While this exercise may feel awkward or silly at first, it is extremely powerful.

“You might list ten things your partner currently does that make you happy, or five things you appreciate about him or her,” suggests Johnson. “Then, read them out loud, describing them in the most hyperbolic terms possible. Include at least two sexual appreciations. You're likely to discover that praise feels good, even when it's delivered with a hefty dose of humor. See if you can praise each other into embarrassment.”

Keep courting each other. List the things you did to make each other feel special during courtship—whether it was buying flowers or gifts, going to a special restaurant, or dressing up for dates. Would the same things make you feel special today, or have your desires and interests changed? Think of what you're doing now to court each other and come up with five simple ideas each to add to that list. (Make sure they're feasible: A picnic in a meadow is doable for most people; a weekend in Paris might not be!)

“Plan to do one item each per week, and be sure to trade off as you romance each other,” says Michaels. “It may feel a bit artificial or contrived at first, but that's only because you're out of practice. Stick with it and you'll soon realize you're having fun.”

View your relationship as a co-creation. Your relationship is an entity unto itself; it didn't become fixed and unchanging when you moved in together or got married. Relationships are processes, not happily-ever-afters; they change and evolve over time. Thinking about your relationship in this way and treating it as a joint venture—or ADventure as the authors describe in their book—is a subtle but profound mental shift.

“If you can approach your relationship with this mindset and think about it as a collaborative partnership, you will create the optimal conditions for growth and change and will be freer to explore new things both in and out of the bedroom,” Johnson explains. “This will also make it easier for you to remain profoundly interested in each other, since you will be focused on the process of being together rather than locked into the idea that you reached an endpoint years ago.”

Join in one of your partner's hobbies that you've always ignored. You know that hobby that he goes on and on about and that bores you to tears—maybe it's camping, cooking, sports, birding, or something else? Yeah, that's the one. Michaels says you need to get involved in it. Don't just take part; do so enthusiastically and with curiosity about what makes it so appealing.

If possible, try to find something in it that excites you too, or appreciate his excitement and draw energy from that.

“There are a couple of caveats,” he adds. “If the activity is truly unappealing or devoid of interest, find something else. The interest needs to be genuine. Plus, we all need a realm of privacy and solitude, no matter how intimate we are, so be sure that your participation is welcome and not intrusive.”

Take pleasure in serving each other. In our society, the focus tends to be on self-fulfillment. We believe we should “get our needs met” in a relationship. This leads to an almost abusive attitude in which we approach partners with a “what’s in it for me” mentality. We rarely think about what we can do to nurture and support them. But the truth is that the more we give, the more we are likely to get in return. If you can mutually bring an attitude of service into your relationship, you display profound interest in action.

“In sex, this means focusing on drawing pleasure from the pleasure that you are giving,” says Johnson. “In cooking, it means getting as much satisfaction from how your partner responds to a meal you enjoy as from eating it yourself. This is a subtle shift, but the results are exponential. You’re not sacrificing your own pleasure for your partner’s sake; instead you’re drawing on your partner’s pleasure to feed your own.

“This attitude of service can involve really simple things,” she adds. “In our own lives, Mark is an early riser, while I love to sleep in. After he finishes his morning coffee (we use a French press), he grinds the coffee and fills the pot, so that all I have to do is boil the water and put the grounds in the pot, pour, and press. This is what service looks like. Small acts of consideration and caring done on a daily basis can have much deeper meaning than grand romantic gestures.”

Connect non-verbally. It may sound new-agey, but taking a few minutes a day to engage with one another without speaking displays profound interest and can actually help you recreate the experience of falling in love. One technique involves gazing into each other’s eyes in silence. The authors describe “eye-gazing” as follows:

Stand facing each other and maintain eye contact. Focus on your partner’s left eye with your right eye. Allow the muscles around your eyes to relax, and blink gently when you need to. To silence any mental chatter, focus on the act of gazing and keep your attention on your right eye.

Do this daily. Three to five minutes of gazing is optimal, but it may take some practice before you can maintain it for that long. If you feel awkward at first, it’s okay to take breaks. It’s okay to laugh too. Regular eye-gazing will enhance your ability to connect non-verbally. Once you’ve made this a habit, you can use it as a tool for defusing conflict.

“Some people find eye-gazing very challenging, especially if the relationship is not going smoothly,” says Michaels. “If you don’t feel ready for it, another way to connect non-verbally is to hug one another or lie in the spoon position—on your sides, one behind the other in an embrace—and focus on breathing together. Conscious breathing is at the core of many

meditation techniques, and doing it together is both calming and harmonizing. You may find this smoothes the way into doing the eye-gazing practice.”

Become sexual adventurers. Studies suggest that couples who have adventures together have higher levels of relationship satisfaction. This is true of people who travel, scuba dive, or bungee jump. It also includes those who have sexual adventures together; research on swingers, for example, suggests they are happier in their relationships than the general public, and research on couples who practice BDSM suggests they have lower levels of stress hormones after engaging in a scene, even when the scene does not go well.

You don’t have to swing or get overly kinky to reap the benefits of being more sexually adventurous, the authors assert. Something as relatively mild as talking about your previously unexpressed fantasies, watching erotica together, or perhaps visiting a sex toy store can be thrilling when you’re not used to doing so.

“The truth is that if you start to explore your desires—including hidden ones—together, you’re likely to become more interested in each other,” assures Johnson. “And the mutual exploration of sexuality, pushing boundaries, and going into uncharted territory together is incredibly hot and incredibly intimate.”

So what if you’re all for cultivating profound interest, but your partner is, well, uninterested? The authors suggest you give some of these tips a try anyway.

“People will say, ‘But it’s not just me. My partner lost interest a long time ago so why should I praise and court him?’” notes Michaels. “Well, you’re not trying to keep score; you’re trying to revive a marriage. It’s either worth making the first move or it’s not.

“Try it and see what happens,” he adds. “Some people find that romance and intimacy come pouring back. Other times their efforts just serve to spotlight how far gone the marriage really is. If that’s the case, you need to know so that you and your partner can move on. Love is just too important to settle for going through the motions.”

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About the Authors:

Mark A. Michaels and Patricia Johnson are the authors of the new book [*Designer Relationships: A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships*](#) (Cleis Press, September 2015). A devoted married couple, they have been creative collaborators—teaching and writing about relationships, sexuality, and Tantra—since 1999. In addition to *Designer Relationships*, they have written *Partners in Passion* (Cleis Press), *Great Sex Made Simple*, *Tantra for Erotic Empowerment*, and *The Essence of Tantric Sexuality* (Llewellyn). They are also the creators of the COVR Award-winning meditation CD set *Ananda Nidra: Blissful Sleep*.

Internationally known as experts in sexuality, Michaels and Johnson have taught throughout the United States, as well as in Canada, Europe, and Australia. They have been featured on television and radio and widely quoted in numerous publications. They are cofounders of the Pleasure Salon, a monthly gathering in New York City that brings together sex-positive people and pleasure activists from a variety of communities.

Michaels is a graduate of New York University School of Law and holds master's degrees in American Studies from NYU and Yale. Formerly a playwright and translator, he has translated, adapted, and cowritten various works for the stage. Johnson is a retired professional operatic soprano who toured extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and South America. She currently works in turtle conservation; she is certified in reptile monitoring by the Smithsonian-Mason School of Conservation and is a New York state-licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

About the Book:

[Designer Relationships](#): A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships (Cleis Press, September 2015, ISBN: 978-1-627-78147-3, \$15.95, www.michaelsandjohnson.com) will be available in September 2015 at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.