

The Secret to Enduring Love: Love Alone is Not Enough

By Dr. Rob Scuka

Part I

With Valentine's Day a distant memory, our thoughts and emotions have recovered from the excitement and expectations associated with romantic love: roses, chocolates, candlelight dinners; perhaps even an engagement ring.

As wonderful and as exhilarating as all these aspects of romantic love are, experience has taught me a hard lesson: In order for love to endure, love alone is not enough.

My journey to learning that love is not enough

The first part of my journey to this realization involved the pain and disappointment of a divorce after 15 years of marriage. While the specifics were complicated, as they always are, at its core was the loss of love; or, more to the point, the failure of love to endure.

The second part of my journey has been a remarriage involving a stepfamily. Given the failure of my first marriage, I entered my second marriage with a determination that this time the marriage would succeed, and that I would do whatever was necessary to help ensure that, this time, love would endure.

This involved personal therapy, premarital counseling for both me and my wife-to-be, a commitment to figure out what went wrong the first time around, and a determination to learn whatever I needed to learn so that this second time around, love would endure.

The third part of my journey has helped me understand *why* love is not enough, and what is necessary to help ensure that love will endure. After my divorce, I went back to school to become a clinical social worker. That education, plus my professional training as a marriage educator and therapist, have taught me several things about how to help love endure.

How to help love endure

The first insight is that a lasting marriage requires trust. When trust is damaged, as in cases of infidelity, the bonds of love can be weakened or lost. Recovery from infidelity is possible, but it is the lies and deceit that accompany infidelity that makes the loss of trust so challenging to overcome. The lesson: Preserve trust in your marriage as a treasure to be guarded with your life, and never do anything that you cannot be 100 percent open about with your spouse.

The second insight is that an enduring marriage is founded on love, but the long-term success of a marriage involves employing a set of relationship skills. An enduring marriage requires the ability to express oneself without criticizing or putting down your spouse, which inevitably causes defensiveness and shuts down the possibility of genuine communication. It also requires

the ability to empathize with your spouse in a deep way, and to show understanding so that your spouse *feels* understood. The lesson: Good relationship skills can be learned in well designed premarital and marriage education classes, and younger engaged and older married and remarried couples are increasingly turning to marriage education to help increase the odds of having a marriage of love that endures.

Part II

Building off the two insights I shared last month, that a lasting marriage requires trust and the long-term success of marriage involves employing a set of relationship skills, I want to share with you my final insight; that an enduring marriage involves living out of certain core values. The most important value involves embracing that a marriage is more than just two people; a marriage is an entity of its own, and has its own needs. Indeed, I believe that the health and endurance of a marriage is directly tied to whether both people apply this value in concrete ways in their marriage.

Me vs. you or we're in it together

In practice, a marriage operates (often unconsciously) in one of two ways. A marriage either operates on the basis that “it’s me versus you and it’s a zero-sum game where one of us wins and one of us loses,” or it operates on the basis that “you and I are in this together and we have to find a way to make things work for both of us. Either we both win, or we both lose – there’s no in between.”

The core emotion that drives an attitude of “it’s me versus you” is fear; fear that I will lose something that is really important to me, so I have to fight to win, so that I don’t lose; but if I win, then you lose, in which case I lose as well because the marriage loses. Many marriages founder because one or both people approach their marriage this way.

By contrast, the core emotion behind “it’s you and me in this together” is love, although we are referring to a form of love different from romantic love. In this context, love is the desire to give voluntarily and unconditionally to enhance the well-being of the other person and to nurture the marriage.

Unconditional giving

Unconditional giving involves giving to my spouse without the expectation of receiving something in return and without being concerned about what’s in it for me. What this translates into in practical terms is that sometimes I do something not because I want to, but because I understand that it’s important to my spouse, and therefore important for our marriage.

For example, I am not a person who particularly enjoys shopping. However, I go shopping with my wife quite frequently, not because I want to, but because she enjoys it when I do, and because it gives us time together, which nurtures our relationship. On the flip side, going to classical music concerts is not at the top of my wife’s favored things to do, but she goes with me because she recognizes it’s important to me, and because it gives us time together, which

nurtures our relationship. The lesson: When two people live out of a spirit of unconditional giving, then love is likely to endure.

So, this year, above all else, give the gifts that make for enduring love in your marriage.

Rob Scuka, Ph.D. is Executive Director of the National Institute of Relationship Enhancement in Bethesda, MD (www.nire.org) and author of *Relationship Enhancement Therapy: Healing Through Deep Empathy and Intimate Dialogue* (Routledge, 2005). Additional information about Rob Scuka can be found at www.robscuka.com.

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