

Making time for intimacy

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

I was going to call this column “Who has time for sex?” – a much catchier title – but given that this is a family newspaper and the emphasis, I believe, should really be on intimacy, which is far more encompassing and important than “just” sex, I’ve opted to tame it down and save that for another time.

The number of people online at all hours makes me wonder who has downtime anymore and with whom and how they choose to spend it. When I ask this in my office, the answers are often surprising.

Not that long ago, we all seemed to have so much more time; evenings were spent together, not distracted by “devices.” Even when I saw couples who complained that one watched too much TV, typically at least they were staying in the same room! Sadly, in our fast-paced “I want it now” world, with everything available virtually immediately, more people are lonelier, relationships lack depth, and sex has become less frequent.

People live longer, but rates of depression are higher and people are definitely less happy. More time is spent on cellphones and Facebook friends abound, but real connection has become rare. Something is very wrong when couples are separately surfing the net all night long and not talking to, or lying in the arms of, the person who is next to them.

One of the most influential articles I read back in my undergraduate days, and have actually held onto until now, was one in *Scientific American* by Harry Harlow. In the late 1950s, Harlow’s studies examined the importance of close physical contact, in this case between baby rhesus monkeys and their “surrogate mothers.”

Cloth and wire mother-surrogates were separately offered to infant monkeys and the results were startling. Even when nursing bottles were attached to the wire “mother,” the monkeys still preferred and spent most of their time clinging to the soft cloth “mother,” suggesting the importance of bodily contact.

Sixty years later we know just how important touch is in creating a healthy and secure relationship. More recently I saw a very distraught wife in her late 70s who came to me because her partner of the same age had withdrawn from her emotionally as a result of illness, and no longer wanted even to hold hands.

As a clinical psychologist who observes relationships that extend across the lifespan from cradle to grave, I can only stress the tremendous importance of being fully present when you are with the one you love. This in part gets created through touch, both metaphorically and physically, and is an essential component of a healthy and secure relationship.

Despite having more ways to simplify our day-to-day lives, compared to the past, our far more complex and fast-paced lives now leave us with little time, energy or commitment to invest in the warm and loving relationships with others – a friend, a relative or even a partner – that we so need for ourselves.

Recently, Robert Waldinger, director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, discussed the rich results of a 75-year longitudinal study of happiness

about. This is not only detrimental to our current relationships, but will have a dramatic impact on those of our children and their children.

Serving as important role models for them, our values are often misplaced, leaving them to mistakenly believe (as we do) that what is important is really not, and vice versa. Here are some suggestions for creating closer relationships:

- Make time for important relationships and watch them flourish.
 - Be completely invested in these relationships – giving these important people in your life your undivided attention, being truly free from outside distractions, listening to their every word and ensuring that you are physically and emotionally present.
 - Intimacy is not only physical, it is letting someone else into your space. Treat these people as if there were no one more important in the world and let them know that you care about what they have to say.
 - Create a safe place so those you love can share their feelings and concerns, free from judgment, admonition, laughter or shame.
 - Ensure that you spend important time together, be it a date night, lunch together or even a walk – but make time to be alone together and see this as a high priority.
 - Make sure that you take the initiative in suggesting things to do that are fun and meaningful.
 - Apologize in a conversation when you even think you might be wrong. Forgive, let things go, and move on. Life is too short. Work instead to strengthen your relationship, recognizing we all are human and imperfect.
 - Create opportunities for physical contact and intimacy. A good hug or holding a hand go a long way.
 - Be responsive to your partner’s needs and see this as a priority. Don’t wait to be too tired when you lack energy.
 - Create the time and place. Be open to discussing how to improve your relationships and take the lead in these conversations.
 - Always take the time to tell those you care about just how you feel.

Do it daily in both words and deeds. You can never tell someone you love them too many times. If it is hard for you to express yourself, work on it.

• Look after your own physical and emotional well-being and encourage those you care about to do the same.

Remember, everyone has time for intimacy, but only if you make it a priority. ■

The writer is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Ra’anana, and author of Life’s Journey: Exploring Relationships – Resolving Conflicts. ludman@netvision.net.il; www.drbatyaludman.com



WE NOW know just how important touch is in creating a healthy and secure relationship.
(Hector Casanova/TNS)

which described what I have observed clinically for many years. He states that warm and loving, deep and meaningful relationships are essential to our emotional and physical wellbeing.

Feeling safe, loved, nurtured and content enables us to feel both healthier and happier, improves our quality of life and extends longevity. It is not the “stuff” – the money, car, house, job – that in the end brings us happiness, but the close connections that we form with other human beings.

Sadly, in 2017 it feels as if we spend more time touching objects rather than other humans and have less eye contact and real face time with those we really care