

Small Acts, Big Love

People Who Put Their Mates' Needs First Make Themselves Happier Too

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

Chris Kline doesn't like to tell his wife of 17 years, Tara, that he loves her. He prefers to show her—by loading her favorite songs on her phone and warming up her car on cold mornings. While she was away on business recently, he surprised her by painting her home office in her favorite colors, Mardi Gras purple and gold.

"Saying 'I love you' is just words," says Mr. Kline, a 42-year-old engineer from Shoemakersville, Pa. "I like to do things that require effort, planning and a little bit of sacrifice. It shows you are putting the other person first."

Researchers call this "compassionate love"—recognizing a partner's needs and concerns and putting them ahead of your own. "It's not just making people feel good," says Harry T. Reis, a University of Rochester professor of psychology. "It's a way of communicating to the other person that you understand what they are all about and that you appreciate and care for them."

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Since 2009, Dr. Reis has been studying 175 newlywed couples from around the U.S., asking how they show their spouses compassion. His findings, not yet published, indicate that

people who discover ways to regularly show their spouses this kind of love are happier in their marriages.

Small selfless acts between spouses aren't just nice—they also are necessary, experts say. When acts of kindness and caregiving disappear, it is an indication the relationship needs help. And when you are compassionate to your partner, it increases your own happiness at least as much as the other person's.

Dr. Reis says men in the study were more likely than women to report putting their partner's goals ahead of their own, by a margin of about 15 percentage points. Men were more likely to report modifying their plans for their partner's sake. Dr. Reis says the men, as newlyweds, may have been consciously trying to be supportive of their wives. And certainly men often seem more comfortable showing love through actions than words.



Accept, don't judge. Give your spouse time and space to do what he likes to do—even if it annoys you.

Showing a little compassion shouldn't be so hard. Yet in many relationships, people forget that one small loving gesture—or many—can go a long way. We get busy and stressed. We take each other for granted. It isn't easy to stifle our own agenda and put our partner's first.

"This stuff sounds really touchy-feely," says Dr. Reis. "But the good news is you don't have to talk about stuff with your partner. You could give a massage or pick up dinner."

It's important not to expect payback, other than a thank you. You're not supposed to trumpet what you are doing, Dr. Reis says. "The 'I'll take your needs into account if you take my needs into account' path to relationship improvement is guaranteed to fail," he says.

10 Marriage Sweeteners

Harry T. Reis, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, has identified 10 ways couples can show 'compassionate' love to improve a relationship

- Put your partner's goals first. Giving your husband the last cupcake is easy. Spending your vacation—again—with his family is hard.
- Try to understand your partner's thoughts and feelings. Not sure what's going on? Ask.
- Accept, don't judge. Don't like your spouse's relatives, or his taste in clothes or TV shows? Zip it.
- Be open to your partner's requests. Everyone is busy. If your spouse asks for something, assume it's important.
- Modify your plans for your spouse's sake. Does she need a night off from parenting, or a few hours to finish a work project? Accommodate and earn relationship goodwill.
- Do something special for your partner. Flowers are nice, but so is making the bed or giving a massage.
- Express tenderness and caring. Not everyone likes public displays of affection. But you can make a nice cup of tea.
- Go out of your way to 'be there.' Pay attention when your partner seems particularly stressed and try to help.
- Show respect and admiration. Celebrate successes, even little ones. Did your spouse handle a touchy situation well, or make you laugh? Point it out.
- Show you value your partner. Two words: Thank you.

When I asked people what they do to show love to a partner, the examples poured in. I heard of men who peeled oranges and cleaned windshields for their wives, and women who brought home their husband's favorite dark chocolate-covered cashews. Bill Kalmar, 69, a retired director of a state quality council from Orion, Mich., carries his wife's bag from the gym and warms up her side of the bed on cold winter nights. Mary Westheimer, 57 and a business manager for her sculptor husband in Phoenix, says they compete to see who can "spoil" the other more. "He will empty the dishwasher and not say anything to me, and I will get him back and take out the garbage," she says.

Ms. Kennedy-Kline, 42, is a self-described "snuggler" who says "I love you" a lot. In the couple's first years of marriage, they entered a bad cycle. Mr. Kline felt unloved when, after work, he came home and found the trash cans sitting at the end of the driveway and dishes in the sink. "If you love me, why can't you do this?" he would ask.

The more he criticized, the less she stepped up, she says. Mr. Kline, feeling ignored, stopped telling her he loved her. "We each felt we weren't getting what we wanted from the other," says Ms. Kennedy-Kline, a parenting coach and author.

The couple ended the cycle by accident. Once, to calm down after an argument, Ms. Kennedy-Kline started tackling chores, and soon noticed it had a soothing effect on her husband. He started to cuddle up in bed and rub her back when he walked by.

She tried an experiment. She sat her husband and their two sons down at the table and asked each one how he preferred to have love shown to him—and wrote down their answers. The Klein's son, Max, now 14, said he wanted to be complimented, told when he'd done a good job and hugged. Their younger son, Alex, now 12, said he would like to spend time with his parents and be tucked into bed at night. Ms. Kline explained that she likes to be hugged and to be told that she is loved. Her husband's answer? "Just do stuff," he said. "It was important to see that the way we can show love isn't the way we want it back," Ms. Kennedy-Kline says.

Now, Mr. Kline tries to be more verbally and physically affectionate. "When I say those words to her, it does mean something to her," he says. And when she cleans out the dog kennel and takes out the trash. She and her husband "both understand the language now, so we get it," she says. "Thank goodness the dog knows his car," she adds. When her husband comes down the driveway, "I will stop whatever I am doing and go start sorting laundry."