

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services

News & Views

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such as sexual
addiction
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Disorder from past
abuse
Relational issues
Adjustment to life
changes

Ages Served

Adult
Adolescent
Children ages 10 & up

On the Giving of Gifts

As we are entering the holiday season, finding that "perfect gift" for a friend or loved one is certainly on the minds of many. Although in celebrating Christmas, Christians understand that God gave the only perfect gift in the person of His Son, yet it has become a tradition to give gifts to others in celebrating this holiday. Although I certainly would not consider myself the ideal giver of gifts, as many others are much more naturally gifted at this and at selecting the gift that says just "the right thing" to the receiver, I would like to share a bit about what I've learned over a half century (boy, does that sound long...) of giving and receiving gifts.

Lesson #1 would be that the thought that goes into the gift truly tends to define how special it is as opposed to simply how much it cost. Children actually have it quite easy. A small child can make a necklace for his or her mother out of pasta noodles strung on a string, painted or not, and it will be seen as priceless. Perhaps she might not wear it to the office Christmas party, or perhaps she might as the case may be, but certainly at the family Christmas dinner or around the house the child would know that he had given "the perfect gift" in what he had made when he sees his mother wearing it. Even adults, and in all likelihood we have all been there or perhaps still are, may not be able to afford expensive store-bought gifts, so we make them. It might be knitting a scarf, making ice candles (I remember my wife and I getting quite good at this during medical school), or any of a number of other items that involve both thought and personal effort. These are also generally highly valued by the recipient of the gift.

It is a bit harder as a teenager in picking out gifts for that "special someone." There you have to please several people... the girlfriend or boyfriend, but also her parents. It cannot be too intimate, it cannot be in any way suggestive, or too expensive, as any of these may get a cool reception from mom or dad. I guess it boils down to using a bit of common sense or even consulting with your own parents or another adult who is a parent. Run the idea by them first.

Lesson #2 would be not to give gifts that might serve your purposes more than that of the one receiving the gift. An example might be to never, unless it has been specifically requested, give your wife a vacuum cleaner for Christmas. I would also tend to avoid other utilitarian objects which are used for your benefit, such as blenders, crock pots, etc., unless these have been requested and because of finances would generally not be in the family budget. One strange exception to this rule, however, has to do with men. Buying men various tools is generally acceptable, especially if they have been mentioned in the past. But again, I would caution women about buying tools that are specifically to be used for "to do lists" that have been made up by the wife rather than the husband.

Lesson #3 is to pay attention to the gifts that have always seemed appreciated in the past. This might be a favorite perfume, various items of clothing, and at least for women, in most cases, jewelry is a fairly safe bet. But again, if you have a very active and outdoors type of wife or girlfriend who rarely gets dressed up and is more of a jeans and flannel shirts type of woman, don't try to make her into someone she is not by buying jewelry or other items that she would not normally wear. This may sound like common sense, but you would be amazed how rare common sense actually is. The same is true for women buying for men. If your man happens to be more into suits and ties, Dockers and sport shirts, then don't try to change him into your fantasy cowboy by buying him boots, jeans, and Western-style shirts. Either of these types of gift giving will give the message that the other person is not what you would like them to be... not exactly the message you are trying to send.

Lesson #4 goes back to a topic we have previously discussed in earlier newsletters. I would ask you to refer to our newsletter on Love Languages at http://stonebriarps.com/files/2007_6_Love_Languages.pdf. Any time you can tie a gift to the love language of your partner, it will have a high likelihood of success. As a quick review, five common ways that we often express and receive love tend to be through acts of service, words of affirmation such as praise or verbally saying "I love you," touch (not



necessarily sexual), spending time together in general interactions verbally or through shared activities, and gifts. What does this look like when it comes to selecting a present?

Keep in mind, these are only examples, and I am sure that you are as creative as I might be in applying these ideas. An active service type of gift might be a "gift card" for giving your loved one free massages, doing certain chores for them for a given period of time, or perhaps even doing a specific task that you know they have wanted done, or plan to do themselves, but haven't gotten around to doing. Perhaps one of the greatest acts of love that I could perform would be to paint a room for someone else. That may not mean much to you, but as someone that absolutely hates to paint it would require a great display of love and commitment.

Words of affirmation can be expressed through a card whose words are highly specific and deeply felt, or perhaps even better a card that you make yourself with your own words. Yes, I know that can be difficult, and we are not all poets. Again, a personal experience. Probably forty years ago I promised my wife that I would write her song, and I had every intention of doing so for whatever the occasion may have been. It actually was much more difficult to do than I had imagined. But I finally got it done last year and recorded it on a CD for her for Christmas. It will never make the top 10, but I do hope she appreciated the effort and the love behind it. I would also encourage you not to make promises unless you have some idea of what you are getting yourself into. There are also certain gifts such as plaques, wall hangings, etc., that can be found and that may express your love and appreciation for her as a spouse, a mother, or just feeling fortunate to be spending your life with her. Those represent pretty good words of affirmation.

Expressing the gift of touch is something that hopefully will go on year-round if that is one of your partner's love languages. But at Christmas you again might give him or her a "gift certificate" to a certain number of massages, not performed by some stranger but by you. You might be amazed how well this can sometimes turn out, and it can even become an ongoing custom that goes both ways. Again one needs to think sensibly about what you're getting yourself into. If you have severe arthritis of the hands, or cannot bend over without a great deal of discomfort to do the massage, then think of something else.

The gift of time might seem quite obvious, but in some ways it can also be one of the most difficult in these busy and hectic times that we live in. Although certainly planning a getaway weekend where you take care of all the details can be a big hit, for many this might also be somewhat cost prohibitive. But again perhaps giving gift certificates for planning outings or picnics in the park, or just agreeing to spend quiet evenings talking or playing board games together with the television turned off, might represent a meaningful gift.

The love language of gifts is an interesting one. Many equate the value of a gift with its cost, but for someone who has this as their love language that often may not be true at all. Cards "for no reason at all," notes, small gifts or things that you see that they might enjoy or find amusing are often among the most appreciated. Again, I don't know too many women that would look down on jewelry, but it is more the thought and the expression than the cost. In some ways, I feel that Christmas is especially difficult for those of us who do not have gifts as a natural love language, because that is what is so emphasized within our culture. To think outside of the box in exploring some of the other love languages does require more thought and creativity.

I would again stress that I am no expert on gift giving but am merely trying to share some of my experiences based upon some of my observations over the years. The other caution I would like to add, and this comes from professional experience in working with individuals who found themselves in this position, is not to spend more than you can reasonably afford at Christmas. In the long run, this seems to create far more problems for individuals and couples than the love that it tries to express.

From all of us at Stonebriar Psychiatric Services, we would like to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!



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