

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

Love Languages

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I Know He Loves Me, but Why Won't He Show It...

Everyone is familiar with the old story of the New England farmer whose wife complained that he never told her anymore that he loved her. He replied, "I told you that once thirty years ago, and, if I ever change my mind, I will let you know." Although we may laugh at that as humorous, the unfortunate fact is that frequently in relationships we may be expressing love in various ways, but it just doesn't register with the other person. In last month's newsletter, we discussed how differences in personality style can affect relationships and patterns of interaction, and this month I would like to look at the concept of "love languages."

A book was written by Gary Chapman entitled The Five Love Languages in which he describes how individuals frequently express love in different ways. He describes how all of us tend to have certain ways that we especially appreciate when others use this to show that they care about us. He also proposed that the way that we most like to receive love is also the way that we most naturally express love. This may be related to our own personality, interaction patterns that existed in our own family of origin while growing up, or perhaps other significant aspects of our own personal history, but generally we tend to have one or two ways that are especially meaningful.

Although I am certain that one may come up with other ways of expressing love if one thinks about it hard enough, Chapman proposed five primary love languages that we tend to use in expressing feelings of love and affection toward others. These include words of affirmation, touch, gifts, time spent together, and acts of service.

Words of Affirmation

Although all of us like to feel appreciated and to hear words of encouragement and praise, to some this is especially meaningful. Words of affirmation may include statements of how we appreciate certain attributes or actions of the other person, how we value them as a person and find them special and important to us, or at times, like the old New England farmer's wife, just hearing the words, "I love you." It communicates to the other person through words how important they are to us and how much we appreciate having them as a part of our life. Frequently, when the words of affirmation represent an individual's love language, he will find it very easy to praise, encourage, and affirm other people. Again, this is because we often express most naturally that expression of love which we most want to receive.

Touch

All human beings have the need to be touched by other human beings. A study was carried out during World War II in England that examined orphaned infants in a particular orphanage who did not seem to be gaining weight, thriving, or even surviving as well as one would expect. They received excellent physical care with regard to food, changing of diapers, etc., so the reason for this observation was puzzling to those in charge. They decided to do an experiment in which the only variable that was changed was that some of the infants for a certain amount of time each day would be held, stroked and touched, and otherwise played with as most infants are in the usual home situation. The other aspects of the environment with regard to nutrition and care remain the same for both groups. What they found is that the group that received regular touch and human contact gained weight and developed appropriately, whereas those whose physical needs were met but received little touch and interaction from caretakers did not. This need to be touched seems to persist throughout our lives.

However, the need and desire to be touched certainly varies from individual to individual. For some this is a key way of expressing and of wanting to receive love. Although touch can relate to sexual intimacy, it certainly goes beyond that. It may involve holding hands, hugs, brushing one's hair, or any of a number of other ways that we can have physical contact with others. For those who have this as one of their primary love languages, they might often be seen by others as a "touchy-feely" type of person, who frequently initiates physical contact, whether through hugs or a pat on the back.

Gifts

Giving gifts is a part of every known culture and represents the celebration of a special event or simply a token of one's caring about another person. It not only represents giving to someone something that they might enjoy, but perhaps more importantly it signifies to the other person that the giver was thinking about her at the time the gift was selected. Although all of us like to receive gifts, to some it represents an important language for

receiving or expressing love. The cost of the gift is generally immaterial. It need not be expensive, even though a great deal of advertising goes into convincing men that the true way to a woman's heart is to give her something "that sparkles." For someone whose love language is gifts, a card, flowers, or some other simple token of affection can mean a great deal, as the important thing is that they were being thought of when the gift was selected.

Perhaps the secret of giving a truly meaningful gift is to put enough thought into it in order to choose something that would be truly meaningful, preferably in a very specific way, to the individual receiving the gift. Particularly to the individual whose love language is gifts, the more thought that goes into the gift to make it truly special and unique the greater the love that is expressed. Perhaps that is why handmade cards and gifts often mean so much, whether it is from a child to a parent or between lovers or friends.

Time Spent Together

The fourth love language is that of time spent together. One of the great misnomers of our society is that of "quality time." Too often we use that phrase to express time that we spend with someone that is of short duration, and yet we try to believe that it is so good and of such high quality that it fully expresses how much we care. The fact of the matter is that we spend time on those things that are most important to us. Our children know that, our spouses know that, our friends know that, and, yes, our employers know that. We must make decisions about how we are going to spend our time, and, if we don't decide that in an intentional way, you can be sure that what seem like the more urgent things in our life will tend to crowd out the more important.

The gift of time might consist of going for a walk together, playing a board game, listening to music or watching TV (careful, the TV can be a bit mesmerizing to the point that you forget the other person is there), or perhaps just sitting together on the porch. The essence of expressing love through time is in choosing to spend one's limited resource of time with the other person.

Acts of Service

Acts of service as a love language is when one does things for another person which are helpful or needed, whether or not that service is requested. For many, taking out the garbage without being asked, filling a spouse's car with gas, or helping to vacuum or cooking dinner may represent a significant expression of one's love. Even the act of going to work day after day to provide for one's family can be an act of service demonstrating one's love. However, as in expressing all of the other gifts, one must be careful that sheer busyness and activity does not become a way to avoid involvement with loved ones under the guise of showing love.

So What's the Point...?

As you recall, at the beginning I stated that the way we most like to receive love tends to be the way we most naturally and spontaneously show it. It also tends to be the way that we most naturally recognize when love is being shown to us. I'm sure that you can guess where the problem might arise. Let's say that a husband's primary love languages tend to be words of affirmation and acts of service, while his wife's tend to be time and touch. He could be speaking all kinds of affirming words and performing all kinds of service to help his wife around the house, but if he rarely gives her a hug or holds her hand or if he is so busy doing things for her that he spends very little time with her, he may think that he is showing her love and that he is a regular Romeo and should be nominated for husband of the year, but it will never register with her. Conversely, she might be very affectionate and constantly looking for ways that they can spend time together, but if she rarely does things around the house that are important to him or if she rarely demonstrates verbally her appreciation of him, he may see her as distant and uncaring.

The essence of all this is that we need to learn to speak the language of those that we care about and love. It is my experience that this concept applies to all relationships and often is a strong determinant of how successful and valued that relationship is to those involved. In the last 28 years, it is my experience that couples are quite fortunate if they naturally have one love language in common, as this provides a foundation from which to begin. I believe I recall perhaps two, or perhaps three, couples who were having problems and had both love languages naturally in common. Most of us need to work at learning the other love languages if we are going to be successful in expressing to those in our lives how much they mean to us.

My suggestion is that husbands and wives take a few minutes to first decide what one's own top two love languages tend to be, as well as that of one's spouse and children. Then, check it out with the other person. If the children are old enough to understand these concepts, discuss it and check it out with them. If not, then you may discuss this and try to come to some consensus with your spouse regarding the children. Either way, I think you will be surprised at the difference this can make in our relationships when we really try to speak each other's language.



Do you have topical requests for future newsletters? Let us know at: NewsletterQuestions@stonebriarps.com



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