

## How to Never Take Love for Granted

by Lisa Lombardi

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The great thing about being longtime in love: having a relationship you know you can always count on. The not-so-great thing: occasionally forgetting to appreciate what a gift your love really is. Here's how to ensure you'll always cherish each other — and the love you share.

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I'll admit it: Most nights, I dress for bed in a style that could best be described as "shut-in chic." My husband's pj bottoms (yards too long and minus their drawstrings), stretched-out T-shirts inherited from college boyfriends, and the first two socks I find. Of course, I dress that way because it's comfortable. But I also do it because *we're* comfortable. No need to break out the cute lingerie like I did in the first months of marriage: I know my guy loves me no matter what.

But in taking our solid bond as a given, am I unintentionally taking our *love* for granted? Falling into auto-pilot mode is a hazard of the happily hitched, says Yvonne Thomas, Ph.D., a Los-Angeles based relationship therapist. "It's so normal, but that doesn't mean it's healthy," she says. "You start feeling comfortable and safe, and you don't stop to think: Gosh, could we be neglecting each other?" Or, more importantly, could you both be forgetting to cherish your unique, amazing relationship?

The misconception is that when you've found long-term love, you can put your feet up, adds Janice Levine, Ph.D., couples therapist in Lexington, MA, and author of *Why Do Fools Fall in Love?*

"Nothing could be further from the truth," she explains. "This is the person who'll be there for you through thick and thin. Because of that, it's the *most* precious relationship to nurture and take care of."

While it's easy to slip into taking your love for granted, it's also easy for the two of you to keep your relationship top-of-mind, simply by incorporating some no-fuss appreciation exercises into your love routine. Read on for a few everyday ways to celebrate and savor that good thing you've got.

#### 1. Be grateful for the tiny stuff.

Maybe you always say thanks when he does something huge, like backs up your computer files or cleans out the basement. But most days, we're guessing the ordinary contributions he makes barely register. "Over time, we stop noticing what our partner gives. His nice gestures become like wallpaper," says Levine. "We think, Of course he'll take the trash out. So we don't bother to say, 'Thank you.'" Here's why you should: Those two words not only make your man feel like a rock star, they also bring out his sweetest feelings toward you (making him more

inclined to thank you for all *you* do). And the more you acknowledge the tenderness that's already there, the more conscious of it you'll be, and the more you'll truly appreciate just how downright great your love is.

To show him how grateful you are, "get really specific," urges Betsy Sanby, a licensed marriage therapist in Minnetonka, Minnesota. ("Thanks for picking up the take-out — I was so exhausted and you made my night!") You can even jot down your gratitude, as Jennifer Miller, 38, of Santa Clarita, CA, does. "When my husband has been great to me, I write it down on a slip of paper, date it, then place it where he'll find it later, like on the computer keyboard or in a stack of mail," she says. "They're often very concrete things, like 'Thank you for staying up late last night and making sure the bills got paid.'" It takes all of ten seconds, she says, but "I know it means a lot to him, because he keeps every note."

## **2. Stop being so darned efficient.**

It's easy to drift out of couple mode when you're each racing to divide and conquer every task on your to-do lists. "Often, both of you get so busy managing your household responsibilities, it's like you're a tag team, on parallel tracks," says Sanby. In the blur of jam-packed days, you may not even notice what a great team you make — or have a conversation beyond, "You pick up Dylan, and I'll get Maddie. Okay, go!" But even the strongest couples need lazy moments — ideally à deux — to kick back, crack up (in a ha-ha way), and rediscover the joy of being together.

One solution: "Buy some time together — literally," suggests Sanby. "Hire someone to take care of onerous tasks, like mowing the lawn." You don't need to burn through cash, though, to carve out us time. Consider dropping the least-loved activity from your (or your child's) schedule. Also, take advantage of free childcare, from eager grandparents to that neighbor who would gladly swap Saturday afternoon baby-sitting duties with you.

And don't underestimate the power of carting the Chinese-food cartons to the table (instead of nosing in front of the TV or at the counter). Elizabeth Hurchalla, 36, of Venice, CA, has found that simply sitting down together keeps her and her man connected during extra-stressful times. "We've both been working really crazy hours lately. But we try to have dinner together every night, just like our parents made us do with the family when we were growing up," she says. "Even if we're just eating leftovers, we light a candle and sometimes even put on music before we sit and talk about our days."

## **3. Connect for two good minutes a day.**

Sure, weekly date nights are great, but who the heck can consistently pull them off? A more practical intimacy builder: Connect for 120 seconds every day, advises Cheryl McClary, author of *The Commitment Chronicles: The Power of Staying Together*. "Even the busiest pair can find two minutes to focus on each other," she says. "My husband and I pick 9:30 at night, when our kids are in bed." Spend the time giving your man one good compliment ("Your new haircut makes you look hot") or sharing a moment that made you smile ("It was so sweet when you took Ethan out for a bike ride after dinner"). You can also use it as check in time: Ask him, "Anything you wish I were doing more of?"

What's crucial is that you sneak in this one-on-one talk almost every day, even if it's when you're lying in bed at the end of the evening. "It doesn't work to wait until the weekend," adds Sanby. "You can drift far during the

week." What you're really doing is reminding each other why you fell in love in the first place. "It's so beautiful to hear, that two minutes feel like 24 hours," notes McClary.

#### **4. Wear your sweats — but in moderation.**

We all, ahem, *relax* our beauty standards once we're nestled in a cozy relationship. Maybe we lounge in clothes we'd never be seen in public in. Or we blow off our hairbrush. Often, our guy encourages us, either by letting *himself* go, or by complimenting us when we look our absolute worst. "Patrick tends to tell me I look beautiful when I'm sweaty after a run, or I'm a mess first in the morning, so it makes me try less," admits Amanda Dundas, 31, of Brooklyn, NY. "I don't spend an hour straightening my curly hair or bother with makeup, because it doesn't seem to matter to him."

Having a guy who accepts you as is can be a wonderful gift — but it's easy to abuse. You don't need to blow out your hair as meticulously as Jennifer Aniston (and please, who has the time?), but you'll do your bond a big favor by making some effort, some days. It's not just for him, points out Levine: By touching up those roots or slathering on a rich body lotion, "you stay connected to your sensual side" — meaning you'll stay connected to your *sexual* side, too, helping to keep up the intimacy and romance that makes love fun.

#### **5. Have selective vision.**

"There's a term in Aikido, 'Look at your opponent with soft eyes,'" says Sanby. "In marriage, the idea is to keep soft eyes on the places where your relationship is not perfect." Viewing your love through a soft-focus lens, rather than one that plays up every last flaw, can have a magical effect on your relationship. "What you focus on, expands," Sanby notes. "If you decide, 'I'm going to look for the good here,' it really has a way of bringing out the good in each other." That doesn't mean that you'll never get pissed at your guy, or feel disappointed with your union. Cherishing your relationship is not about an unrealistic romance-novel view of love. It's knowing that even when you're driving each other crazy, underneath it all, you'll always value what's irreplaceable about each other — and your bond.

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#### **6. Don't pull out all the stops.**

We all know those super romantic couples that plan amazing, over-the-top surprises for each other. And maybe we even feel guilty that we don't measure up. The good news: Instead of trying to pull off the occasional grand gesture (like arranging a two-day celebration for his 40th birthday), you're better off tucking tiny acts of kindness into every day. "When you do small somethings for each other for the heck of it," says McClary, "it's a way of noticing and appreciating each other." And these little things can often be more meaningful than major public romantic moves, because you're using your insider knowledge to spoil your guy in a way he in particular will understand-and love.

We're talking really easy stuff: Buy his favorite kind of ice cream instead of the compromise flavor you usually drop in the cart. Offer him the extra pillow he always chivalrously gives you (yep, yank it out from under your head). Or, if you want to be even more generous, invite his crazy Aunt Maude over, because you know he loves the old nut.

You don't need to spend a cent. When Dundas' husband has to work so late that she'll be asleep by the time he gets home, she leaves him a "Hi, love you" note: "I write it on my daughter's Etch-A-Sketch," she says.

## **7. Love each day like it's your last.**

There's nothing like a crisis to make us realize just how much our loved ones mean to us. "The death of my parents made me much more aware how you always think you'll have more time, but that's not always the case," says Miller. "Now, every day, my guy and I let each other know what we mean to each other. We never leave each other angry. And we always kiss good-bye and say, 'I love you.'"

"Why wait for something bad to happen to appreciate your relationship?" asks Levine. Take a cue from the "mindfulness" movement and make a daily point of mentally appreciating your equally-great-half and all that your relationship brings to your life. Just having a partner has so many perks — from the profound ones, like having someone to talk to late at night, to the practical ones, like having someone else to kill those water bugs late at night. By valuing those fringe benefits, you can't help but feel good about him. You can even start with this exercise: "Ask yourself: What three things about our relationship do I hold most sacred?" suggests McClary. "Once you realize what they are, it's difficult to take them for granted."

Heck, just the fact that you and he are still side by side is cause to break out the good wine glasses, Thomas points out. "To be in a solid relationship, where more right is happening than wrong, is a wonderful blessing," she says. "Treasure that, and safeguard what you've got."

## **8. Have You Touched Him Today?**

If you want to show your guy how much you appreciate him, get hands on, advises marriage therapist Betsy Sanby. "Being touched makes men feel loved in a way that words can't," she explains. Why? Guys tend to express love through action more than words, so when you wrap your arms around him, you're speaking his native language. Sure, he loves your sweet talk, adds Sanby, but it's your hand on his back (face, etc.) that really makes him feel adored. Her advice? Don't let a day go by without wrapping your arms around him. "It can be a big hug," she says, "a kiss when he does something nice, or frankly, sex." Bonus: Body contact causes your brain and his to pump out the bonding hormone oxytocin, so you're likely to find yourself feeling closer to him with every touch.