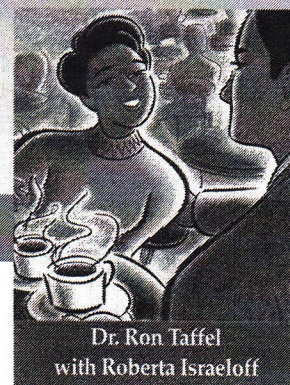


Date Your Mate Take Time



You need regular time away from the children.

Regardless of the problems that bring them to my office, many couples, within minutes, begin talking about the fact that an entire year (sometimes more) has passed since they've had a regular adult date. Countless couples ignore this fundamental way to nourish their relationship.

There are several reasons, all of which seem to have gotten worse over the three decades I've been practicing. The first is that *Mom* can't find reliable babysitting. (Unfortunately, in over 95% of first, second, or even third marriages, arranging for the babysitter is *still* considered "women's work.")

Convenient, reliable babysitting is difficult to come by for several reasons. With the extended family a plane ride away, Grandma, aunts or cousins can't usually drop over to help out. Finding a babysitter with whom you feel comfortable takes a long time. And if you do, it's often expensive. The contemporary teenage workforce has sophisticated tastes and habits to feed, and sometimes they charge so much that many families simply cannot afford regular childcare. Finally, by the time Friday or Saturday rolls around, many parents are just too exhausted to get themselves out of the house.

Anyway, when you can watch movies on cable TV or rent a video and order a pizza, why bother leaving home? Being a couch potato doesn't sound all that bad, and it's a whole lot less expensive.

Yet despite the initial hassle, nothing is more nourishing than getting away together from the children and the Endless List.

Here are the concrete steps successful couples take in order to enjoy time away.

1. Decide on a regular night out.

If you can't afford a once-a-week date, then settle for every other week or once a month; *frequency is less important than predictability* – for both kids and parents. **The earlier you establish this regular date, the more easily it's integrated into the pattern of family life.** Parents make the mistake of waiting too long, assuming that separation is hardest on very young children. Except in special situations (usually having to do with a child's medical condition), exactly the *opposite* is true. Most young children may cry at first, but will settle down with a friendly and outgoing babysitter within a few minutes. Don't let an upsetting transition stop you.

Again, young children need predictability. **If possible, use the same babysitter, go out on the same night of the week** (by around age three kids begin to grasp what "Saturday night" means), **and spend approximately the same amount of time away.** This way, both you and your children will more quickly adapt to the new routine.

2. If you can't afford babysitting or you can't find a sitter reliable enough to put your mind at ease,

try cooperative babysitting arrangements with other families in your area. For example, John and Katherine, parents of five-year-old Michael and three-year-old Charlene, recently moved to their dream house in the suburbs. The dream, however, had its nightmarish side – six months had passed without a single Saturday-night date. I strongly encouraged them to call the other families at Michael's nursery school. Sure enough, they found a family willing to babysit for them every other Saturday night in exchange for the same favor. After a couple of months, the atmosphere in John and Katherine's house changed dramatically.

3. Once you're able to successfully establish a regular night out, make plans to go away overnight together.

Remember, you can't be spontaneous and wait for the mood to hit or all the right circumstances to fall into place. After you have children, *you have to plan ahead.*

To make the first trip away as painless as possible, start modestly, perhaps with a long day trip. Then you can gradually increase your time away as you feel more comfortable. For example, I suggested to one couple that instead of looking for a summer rental with kids in tow (a six-hour round trip; think of the possibilities for aggravation), they should go by themselves and make a day of it. The two had a wonderful time: *"We're thinking about taking regular bus trips together – anywhere – just to have some time sitting by ourselves talking or reading."* After two more "practice" day trips, they were ready to go for the "big leagues" – an overnight.

4. As a rule of thumb, plan an overnight before your child's first birthday

(unless your child has been sick or has recently suffered a major loss). *Why do couples so often return from an evening away raving about their sex lives?* I believe it has something to do with getting away from not just the kids, but the Endless List as well. Around the house, everything we look at reminds us of something that needs to be done. **Different surroundings simply don't have the power to trigger Endless List anxiety, which is a huge step toward making intimacy possible.**

Stacey and I got away for the first time when Leah was about a year old. We left guilt-ridden and anxious at 5:00 P.M. on Saturday and came back rejuvenated and satisfied at 12:00 noon

on Sunday, not exactly a trip around the world. But in the end we both have wonderful memories of that "steamy" night, as if it had been an exotic journey to a distant land. However, it took a *lot* of preparation.

How to have a good time for two

From stepping out for a movie to planning an overnight:

1. Plan a moderate first date. Don't overdo things by going away for a weekend before you've been away for an afternoon.

2. The Endless List always swells with new items that need to be taken care of before going out. To avoid resentment toward each other, try to divide up these tasks as equitably as possible.

3. Give the babysitter detailed instructions and a full list of phone numbers where you can be reached in case of an emergency. When possible, make travel and hotel arrangements that can be canceled if the kids should get sick. Most airlines will grant refunds with a pediatrician's note.

4. Prepare young kids for your trip just a few days (a week at most) in advance. There's no reason to tell them months before and let their anxieties build up over time. Older, school-aged children should be given a couple of weeks' notice.

5. Before leaving, give your child something of yours that has your smell, like a scarf or shirt, which they can take to bed with them. Or leave a tape of you singing a lullaby or reading

a story if you'll be away overnight. Anything that will remind them of your presence will help.

6. Call home, but not at bedtime. Some kids who have settled down for the night become easily upset at this vulnerable moment. Don't be too concerned if your child starts crying when they hear your voice, or doesn't want to come to the phone. The upset usually lasts for just a few minutes.

7. Respect your partner's or your anxiety. Don't minimize or mock; instead, try to soothe it. You don't want to begin your time away with smoldering resentments. You want to make love, not war.

8. Don't expect intimacy immediately. It takes time to get used to being alone again.

9. Aim to relax – don't overschedule, especially during weekends away. Pencil in lots of down time together and some shared activity, but keep these as easygoing as possible.

10. On your return, be prepared for kids who may act less than thrilled to see you. Kids tend either to ignore their parents or to act regressed, especially toward Mom. This is entirely normal and usually passes quickly. Don't interpret either behavior as a sign that your time away was harmful to them. Unless you can see serious physical or psychological problems resulting from your absence, try it again. ♡♡

Excerpted from WHEN PARENTS DISAGREE AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT by Dr. Ron Taffel with Roberta Israeloff, © Ron Taffel and Roberta Israeloff. Published by The Guilford Press.

It's Easy to Stay Connected: TAKE A WEEKLY DATE

It's not frivolous to date:
it's the investment that avoids relationship bankruptcy.

by Steve Stephens

"Let's go on a picnic dinner."

"Where?" I asked.

"At this great park where they have evening concerts," Tami said. "We can get some food at this new restaurant and enjoy the music at the park."

Tami made arrangements for our kids and off we went. We enjoyed the picnic dinner as we watched the sun set to the beat of old-time fifties rock and roll. "What do you want to do next?" Tami asked.

"There was that romantic movie you wanted to see," I said.

Tami was delighted as we drove to a theater and had a great time together. After the movie we shared an incredibly rich and wonderful dessert at an elegant downtown restaurant. As we closed the evening, Tami wanted to catch a view of the city lights from the top of a nearby hotel. As we went up the elevator, Tami pressed the wrong button.

Then she reached into her purse, pulled out a hotel room key, and said, "Our kids are spending the night with friends."

I was shocked.

The hotel room was filled with candlelight and love songs. That afternoon Tami had packed an overnight bag for both of us and delivered it to the room. She had decorated everything and even scattered rose petals over the bed.

The next morning we slept in, read novels, shared mochas and sweet rolls, and explored downtown Portland. What a fantastic date!

YUMMY MEMORIES

Every time I think about that date, I am reminded of my love for Tami. **Dating is a way to express your appreciation, create romance, show respect, add significance, and share**

love. If you don't date your mate, you risk sending the opposite message, like: *You don't appreciate him. You don't care about romance. You don't respect her. You don't see him as significant. Maybe you don't even love her anymore.*

Couples don't usually decide to stop dating; it just happens. Sometimes the responsibilities of work or family take all your time. Sometimes the hectic pace of life takes all your energy, leaving you too tired and exhausted for much else. Other times you just get lazy and fall into a rut of inactivity and distraction. **Then there are the two big logistical problems: no money and no child care.** But if you want a great marriage, you won't use any of these excuses, for love always finds a way.

How can something that once was so easy become so hard? It doesn't have to be! All you have to do is remember a few simple principles:

Schedule dates

If you don't schedule dates, you won't have dates. Pull out your calendar and mark down your dates for the next several months. Sometimes it's easier to circle a particular evening each week and make this your regular date night. I know a couple that makes every Monday their movie date night. But it doesn't have to be in the evening to be a date. **If it's more convenient, schedule breakfast dates or midday dates. It's not important when they happen; it's just important that they happen.**

It's amazing how expensive dating can get if you aren't careful. **So make sure you write weekly dates into your budget.** Set aside money that can only be used for going out

together. **Don't think of this as wasted or frivolous money; it's an investment in your marriage. And if you don't make regular investments, you might find your relationship going bankrupt.** But if finances are tight, this doesn't mean you can't date. There are thousands of things you can do for little or no money. You can go for a drive, fly a kite, walk through a garden, play tennis, or even people-watch. One couple I know often goes for a coffee date at a local bookstore. Another couple enjoys a window-shopping date at a nearby mall.

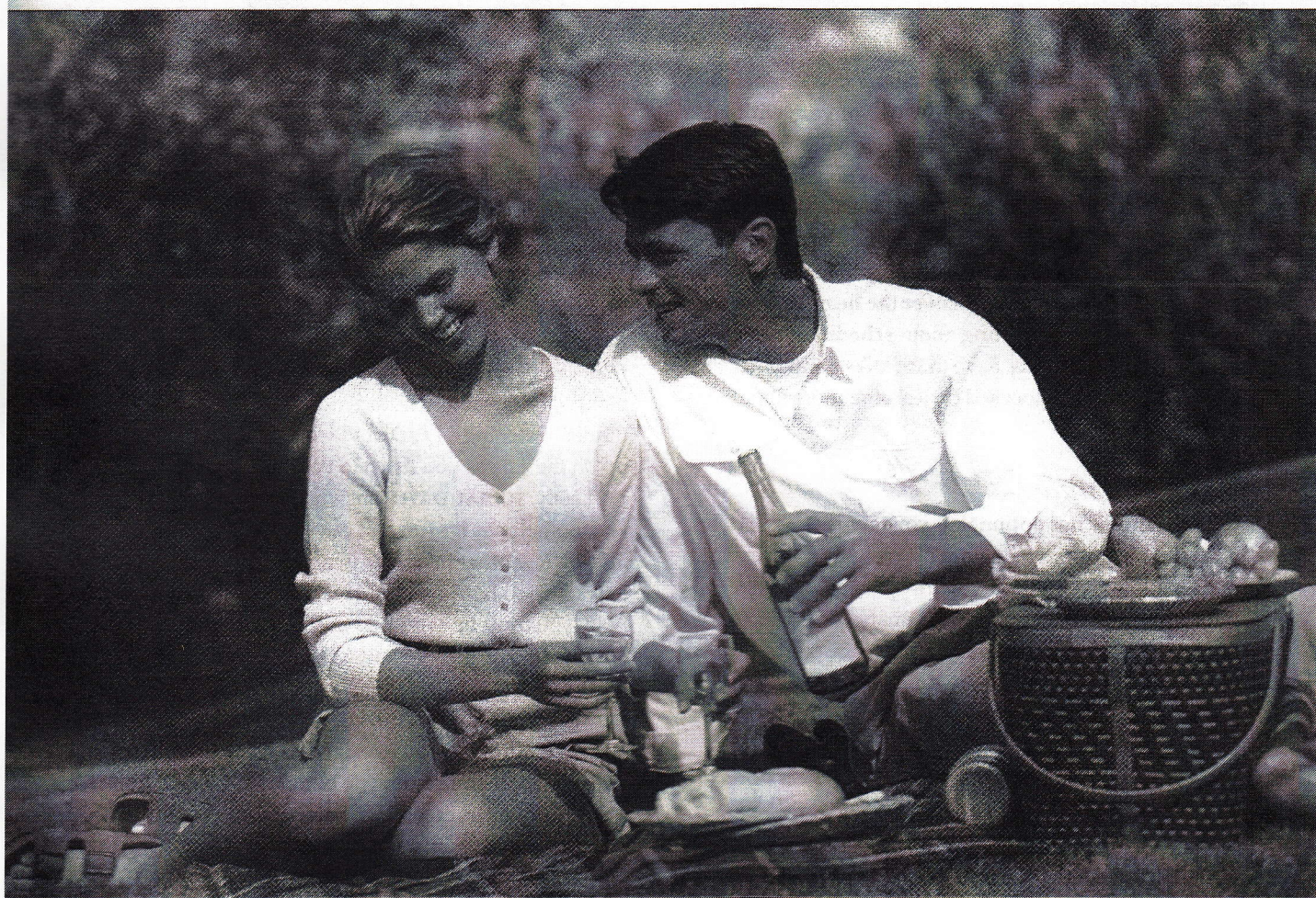
Trade dates

What should you do and who should plan it? This is where some couples get stuck. Others get frustrated because one partner ends up doing all the work of arranging the dates. This sometimes leaves the impression that the other partner doesn't care about dating or isn't willing to put forth much effort. To solve this problem I encourage couples to trade off. The

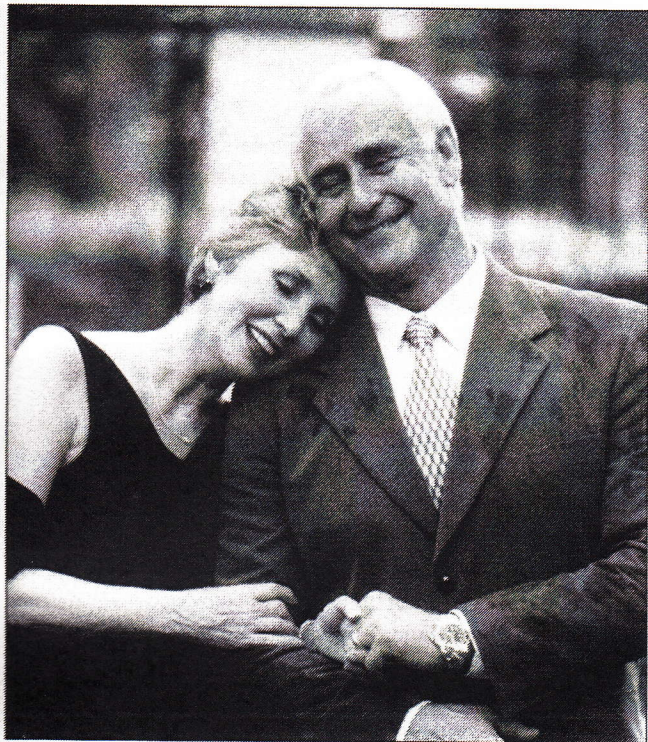
husband plans and makes all the arrangements for one date. This includes deciding on the activity, arranging for child care, and planning the meals. The wife plans and arranges the next date. Then you repeat the process. When your partner is in charge of the date, cooperate and be positive even if what they choose to do isn't your favorite thing. The next week you'll be in charge.

Energize dates

When you date, don't get stuck in a rut. If you always go to the same restaurant, it soon loses its special appeal. The best dates hold at least some uniqueness, wonder, variety or creativity. So try new things. Maybe you'll develop a new favorite. And if you don't, at least you've created a new memory. Doing things that are new or different energizes your dating and keeps your love alive. **Boredom can kill your spirit and your relationship. So energize it.**



Remember when you just met and you couldn't spend enough time together? Rekindle the spark by spending fun time with your beloved.



Communicate dates

The most important thing about your dates is not what you do or where you go but how you communicate. **Talking and listening — just the two of you, without distraction — can be one of the most positive times of your week.** So whatever you do, make sure intimate, honest, deep-down communication is a part of it. When you know one another intimately, your marriage becomes more emotionally rewarding than ever.

Share your heart and discover the heart of your mate. Get close, but avoid talking about schedules, money, children or complaints. Save those talks for another time. Keep your date talk focused on learning more about one another's heart.

Romance dates

Romance is not optional. If you ignore it, your dates will suffer and ultimately your marriage will suffer. Too many couples let romance slip away because it's not easy. But easy or not, it is important. Romance involves the old-fashioned word *chivalry*. The word may be old-fashioned, but the concept isn't. Chivalry can be a knight in shining armor rescuing his beloved. It can be a gentleman laying his coat across the mud so his lady won't get her shoes dirty. It can be a husband opening his wife's car door. However it looks, chivalry is courtesy and kindness and letting your spouse know you treasure him. **Romance also involves generosity and selflessness.** Romance can make the simplest date a smashing success.

Enjoy dates

When you go on a date, do everything you can to please your partner and make it a great experience. Know what they like and where they like to go. Do it their way. I get the most joy from seeing Tami relaxed and having a wonderful time. I want to give her *my* attention, *my* heart, and *my* best attitude. So have fun, smile, laugh, and do the things the *two* of you enjoy most. **Make your time together the best. Fill it with joy and closeness emotional, intellectual and physical.** Show your spouse what love is all about.

FOUR KINDS OF DATES

Apply these principles to whatever type of date you have, and you will never regret it.

Here are the four major types of dating:

TRADITIONAL DATES involve dinners or movies or drives in the country. They may be expensive or may not cost a penny; they may be active or may be laid-back. They are wonderful, and they are within the realm of normal.

EXTREME DATES are highly unusual and beyond the norm. A friend of mine is a flight attendant who surprised his wife with breakfast in Paris. Now *that* was an extreme date! You, too, may have experienced certain highly special dates that you'll never forget. If these happen once a year, you should be happy. If they don't, plan one.

IN-HOUSE DATES happen when finances, child care, or exhaustion limit your freedom. **In-house dates should never become a replacement for traditional dates, but they can periodically provide another option.** There are plenty of enjoyable activities right at home: a candlelit dinner, watching a DVD or video together, or snuggling up on the sofa as you listen to your most romantic CD.

Lastly, **SOCIAL DATES** are when another couple joins you. Sometimes it's fun and can even add variety if you invite a few other people to join your date. **Like in-house dates, these should be the exception rather than the rule. Also, you must be careful to choose others who are positive and healthy — and whom you both enjoy.**

Dating brought you together with your partner, and it can keep you together. **Dating pulls you above the ordinary, allowing you special time to communicate and connect.** Enjoying some type of date on a weekly basis will improve your marriage and help you to appreciate each other even more. ♡

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