
4.1. Build Rituals of Connection

Summary

Bill Dougherty, in his work on couples, discusses rituals of connection as an important tool for successful relationships in his book, “The Intentional Family.” A Ritual of Connection is a method of Turning Towards one another that is reliable and can be counted on. For example, in the movie, “The Story of Us,” the couple played by Michelle Pfeiffer and Bruce Willis, together with their children, discuss the highs and lows of their day every evening at dinner. This is a Ritual of Connection that they can count on daily.

A Ritual of Connection needs to be thought out and planned. When will it happen? How often? Where? Who will initiate it? How will it unfold? How will it end?

Another example of a Ritual of Connection is greeting each other at the end of the day. Will there be a hug? A kiss? Questions like, “What were your highs?” “Your lows?” You can decide which ritual you’d like to include in your lives together using the following exercise.

It may be helpful to go back to each person’s memories of primary family and ask about the rituals of connection surrounding these events. Try to elicit rich narratives about these events. Ask about the typical ritual, and then ask about the worst and the best such event. For example, ask people to recall their worst birthday experience growing up. One reason to ask these questions is that there are often unresolved conflicts or traumas surrounding these events, and these get played out in the relationship and keep leading to disappointment, defensiveness, and hurt. These reactions may be projections onto a hapless partner, but they are attributed to that partner’s character. In this exploration, also try to uncover the central elements that each person needs for these rituals to have meaning and for becoming pleasant events they look forward to.

The therapist can expect to encounter considerable resistance to creating these rituals of connection. This resistance will reveal the blocks there are towards intimacy in this relationship. They are worth exploring in their own right.

Once the rituals of connection are in place, this is only part of the picture. There will be times when people miss one another during these times. There will be arguments and failed bids. Because of this, it is very helpful to use the aftermath-of-failed-bids questionnaires to help people process these unfortunate events and ensure that they don’t happen very often.

Instructions

The idea here is for the couple to build in a set of rituals surrounding informal but significant daily events. Ask the couple to discuss and build rituals for the items in the exercise. A Ritual of Connection needs to be thought out and planned. When will it happen? How often? Where? Who will initiate it? How will it unfold? How will it end?

Another example of a Ritual of Connection is greeting each other at the end of the day. Will there be a hug? A kiss? Questions like, “What were your highs?” “Your lows?” Your couple can decide which ritual they would like to include in their lives together using the following exercise.

Have the couple use the following questions to discuss the details of how they would like to do this ritual together, including getting very specific about the details of their ritual.

Questions

- a. What is meaningful about this for you?
- b. When will this be done?
- c. How often will it be done?
- d. How long should it last each time?
- e. Who will initiate it?
- f. Who will do what in this ritual?
- g. What will happen next?
- h. How will it end?
- i. How can we integrate this into our lives so we can count on it?

Have them script these carefully so each person knows what they are supposed to do and when. This includes entry into the ritual, the roles each person will have in the ritual, and its ending. Suggestions are included.

You may use the suggestions in the following exercise, or you may use the “Build Rituals of Connection” card deck.

Additional resources

Level 1: Bridging the Couple Chasm - Chapter 6.

Level 2: Assessment, Intervention & Co-Morbidities - Chapter 17, Intervention #16

Level 2: Assessment, Intervention & Co-Morbidities, 2014 edition - Chapter 11

Exercise: Build Rituals of Emotional Connection***Instructions***

This exercise involves discussing and building rituals for each of the events listed. Script these carefully so each person knows what they are supposed to do and when. This includes entry into the ritual, the roles each person will have in the ritual, and its ending. Some suggestions are included. Discuss, and write rituals that work for you.

- ***Leave-taking:*** Don't leave without knowing at least one thing that is going to happen in your partner's life that day.
- ***Reunions:*** When coming back home, there is an affectionate greeting, a loving kiss that lasts at least several seconds (not a peck on the cheek).
- ***Mealtimes:*** Come together at meals and share the events of the day. Each person gets a chance to talk. Make meals an environment of peace, affection, support, and attention. Avoid conflict during dinners.
- ***Eating out:*** Eating out can be a special event that can turn an ordinary end of a day into a celebration or a romantic event. Eating in a favorite restaurant can become a family tradition and ritual with considerable meaning.
- ***After-meal coffee or tea:*** Doherty and his wife, Leah, created a tradition after dinner in which their children played or did homework while the two of them talked. They all cleaned up after dinner, and then Bill made the coffee and brought it out to Leah in the living room, and they talked for about an hour. It was a time of peace and connection.
- ***The reunion stress-reducing conversation:*** Each person gets a turn to talk about what was stressful that day (not about the relationship) and to receive support.
- ***Bedtimes:*** Going to bed is a time when there can be cuddling, physical affection, letting go of tension and irritability. Don't go to sleep without a kiss (not a perfunctory one).
- ***Morning rituals:*** For many families, mornings are chaotic times, but this need not be the case at all. They can be times of connection when everyone is sent off with positive wishes and a good spirit.

- **Dates and getaways:** These are times when the couple gets a babysitter and does something alone, on their own, including talking to one another. No kids are to be present. In our child-centered families, these dates and getaways (such as for a weekend to a bed and breakfast inn) become very rare. We recommend a weekly date and weekend getaways three times a year.
- **When one person is sick:** Rituals surrounding getting sick and being taken care of can be very important to people. Often spouses have very different ideas about how they want to be treated when they are sick.
- **Celebrations of a triumph:** How does this family deal with pride and praise, celebrate successes, and acknowledge and reward achievement? I recommend that the family build what I call a culture of praise. By this I mean that it is possible to search for things to be thankful for and pleased about, even if these are only small and everyday things.
- **Rituals surrounding bad luck, failure, fatigue, or exhaustion:** How does this family heal, support, or renew itself?
- **Rituals surrounding entertaining:** The idea of a home and bringing friends into it can lead to important rituals of connection for a couple and for children.
- **Rituals surrounding keeping in touch with kin and friends:** Family events, reunions, and so on can play a vital role in families.
- **Rituals surrounding initiating and refusing love-making and talking about it:** These are often very important events that get left for the very end of the day when everyone is exhausted and has little left for tenderness—or for facing potential rejection. The famous sex therapist Lonnie Barbach says that couples often think these events should be spontaneous, and so they avoid any scripting or planning. However, if they think back to their courtship they recall that romantic dates were often planned, even the attire, perfume, place to go, music and wine for the return to his or her apartment, and so on. Once married, suddenly these events become an afterthought, and, hence, a casualty of being married. This has led to the old saw that a relationship is the cure for lust.
- **Vacations:** The way people introduce a need or idea for a vacation, how they plan the trip, and what the vacation itself is like: Do people take work to do? Are they available to the office? How separate are they, how together? etc.

- ***There are rituals of connection that surround somewhat more formal events, such as anniversaries, birthdays, and so on:*** Then there are the more formal events and holidays that tend to be rich in emotional significance and may involve extended family or community. These constitute a yearly holiday cycle, which can be imbued with profound meaning.
- ***Rituals of passage:*** Doherty also talks about rituals of passage such as baptisms, circumcisions, bat mitzvahs, first communions, weddings, and funerals. These meaningful events punctuate the family life cycle and are usually community events as well.

Opportunities for Rituals of Connection

1. Dinner times
2. Eating out
3. Celebrating success
4. Communicating that you are proud of your partner
5. Communicating daily appreciations
6. Bringing friends into your home
7. Small dinner parties
8. Having a big party at home
9. Initiating lovemaking
10. Refusing lovemaking
11. Talking about how to improve lovemaking
12. How to renew ourselves when we are fatigued or burned out
13. How should we deal with bad luck?
14. Taking off our clothes at night and getting into bed
15. Falling asleep
16. Waking in the morning
17. Bringing up issues in our relationship
18. Expressing needs
19. Taking leave of one another in the mornings
20. Reunions at the end of the day
21. Discussing stressful events
22. Weekends
23. The Sabbath/Day of Rest/Sunday (how should it be celebrated?)
24. Dates
25. Get-Aways
26. When one of us gets sick
27. Vacations (how do we decide where we go or when we go?)
28. Birthday (how should they be celebrated?)
29. Anniversaries (how should they be celebrated?)
30. Thanksgiving (how should it be celebrated?)
31. Christmas/Chanukah/Ramadan/Kwanzaa (how should it be celebrated?)
32. New Year (how should it be celebrated?)
33. Easter/Passover (how should it be celebrated?)