



Share

Developing and Maintaining a Couple Identity

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What *Share* Looks Like

- Scheduling meaningful time together
- Finding common interests and activities
- Creating couple traditions and rituals
- Working towards common goals
- Nurturing positive interactions
- Sending clear and positive messages
- Turning toward partner's bids for connection
- Envisioning yourselves as a team

Introduction

A powerful, yet simple, idea lies at the heart of couple relationships and marriage: *the sum of two standing together is greater than one standing alone*. Whether it is called love or friendship or “we-ness,” this idea of the power of two lives shared and bonded together as a couple encompasses the concept of *Share*. The dimension of *Share* embraces the idea that trust, friendship, and love shared by two people is at the heart of meaningful, enduring couple relationships (Gottman, 1994; Harris, Skogrand, & Hatch, 2008).

Unlike *Care*, which focuses on what the individual can do to better the relationship, *Share* emphasizes what couples can do together to promote couple well-being. It takes the efforts of both partners to share with each other and to create a friendship. *Share* is about what a couple learns together, who they become together, and how they grow in love together. In a society that highlights autonomy and glorifies individualism, couples face particular challenges in establishing the time and trust they need for an enduring friendship framed by love (Doherty, 2001; Szinovacz, 1996). A recent groundbreaking book by Paul Amato and his colleagues, *Alone Together*, charts the transformation away from strong, institutional marriages based on mutual commitment toward weaker, individualistic marriages centered on personal fulfillment (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). Amato and his colleagues argue that over time “self-development and personal fulfillment came to replace mutual satisfaction and successful team effort as the basis of marriage” (2007, p. 16).

The *Share* dimension of a couple relationship emphasizes that being a couple, at its heart, is about sharing their lives and developing a close, enduring friendship. While feelings of romance or passion may grow or diminish at different times in a relationship, friendship has the capacity to provide an enduring and stable base for couples over time. It is a process that engages both partners as they explore how to share their lives and how to be meaningful companions to each other. *Share* comprises at least three critical elements that foster the development and maintenance of a close and positive friendship and identity as a couple: (1) spending meaningful time together that builds the relationship, (2) fostering a shared sense of couple identity (“we-ness”), and (3) nurturing continuing and positive interactions with one’s partner.



Spend Meaningful Time Together

Couples need to give quality attention and care to their relationships each day, as they also keep busy with work or other activities. Some authors have noted that when couples fail to intentionally make time to be together, they naturally drift apart, which they refer to as the “natural drift toward isolation” (Rainey & Rainey, 2003). Time together has been noted as a key issue in couple and marriage relationships from early in their development (Brotherson & Moen, 2011; Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2005). Important aspects of meaningful time together include supporting each other in common interests or activities, spending time together in ways that build intimacy and trust, and engaging in couple traditions that strengthen the relationship.

Engage in and Support Each Other in Common Interests and Activities

If you are going to live with someone in a committed relationship, common sense suggests that you need to do more than love them – you need to learn how to *like* them. Two practices that can aid couples in building a friendship and learning to enjoy each other are (1) engaging in common activities together, and (2) supporting each other’s interests and pursuits. Research on this topic is quite interesting. First, research shows that couples who engage regularly in activities like working on home projects or visiting friends also tend to be happier in their marriages or relationships (Zuo, 1992). However, this does not always mean doing activities together. Relationships also benefit when one partner supports the other in interests, such as when a husband stays home with children so his spouse can go shopping with a friend. Additionally, it is important for couples to support each other and not simply do what one partner likes to do (Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002). What is most important is not simply doing things together, but *how* they are done together. Being positive and supportive of each other (see *Care*), whether doing an activity together or just supporting a partner’s interests, are key ingredients to this aspect of building a friendship (Berg, Trost, Schneider, & Allison, 2001).

Spend Time Together that Builds Intimacy and Trust as Partners

There is a difference between time spent “hanging out” together and time that builds genuine trust and intimacy in a couple relationship. Couples must work to share not only their affection, but their time, and do so in ways that add to the quality of the relationship. Research suggests that married couples have higher relationship quality if they spend substantive amounts of time together and if each spouse feels valued and appreciated during their time together (Russell-Chapin, Chapin, & Sattler, 2001; Szinovacz,



1996). Time spent together that is enjoyable and interactive tends to build greater trust and intimacy in the relationship. Examples of this practice might include daily conversations over a morning cup of coffee or reserving one or two nights a week exclusively for couple time.

Participate in Couple Traditions that Strengthen the Relationship

A couple tradition is an interaction with one’s spouse or partner that is repeated, coordinated, and meaningful to both persons (Doherty, 2001). Couples benefit as they establish and participate in couple traditions that add meaning to their relationship (Fiese et al., 2002). Many married couples seem to lose their closeness and friendship through the logistics of everyday living. Some relationship and marriage educators encourage couples not to get lost in day to day logistics, but rather to grow their marital or couple friendship intentionally by establishing connection routines and rituals in everyday life (Doherty, 2001; Fincham & Beach, 2010; Goddard & Olsen, 2004).

- *Couple routines* represent re-occurring activities or daily habits between two individuals. For example, couples may make a point to kiss each other hello and goodbye. By establishing such routines, couples make sure they are able to maintain a connection despite other commitments (e.g., being apart from each other when working). These instances help remind individuals that they are valued and appreciated, and allow for greater intimacy, trust, and connection between partners.
- *Couple rituals* represent more formal ceremonies or occasions that couples celebrate or engage in on a regular basis. These rituals can be connected to past events in the relationship (e.g.,

anniversaries), each individual's life (e.g., getting a raise at work or some other accomplishment), or national or religious holidays. The observance of meaningful traditions is positively linked with relationship satisfaction.

Several studies have shown couples' observance of meaningful traditions, whether shared daily practices or celebratory events and holidays, is positively linked with couple relationship satisfaction (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Szinovacz, 1996). Couple traditions can range from everyday interactions (e.g., chatting over breakfast in the morning or taking an evening walk together) to annual events (e.g., celebrating an anniversary or birthday in a meaningful way). Importantly, both partners must make an intentional effort (see *Choose*) to understand what activities and events bring meaning to each partner and the relationship (see *Know*) and to schedule time to engage in those activities and events together.

For many couples, there are a number of "time robbers" that get in the way of spending meaningful time together and establishing traditions and rituals of connections. These may include the demands of work, children, conflicting schedules, television, mobile devices and Internet, and even personal hobbies. If regular couple time is not scheduled and made a priority, other things will inevitably consume that special time.

Why Share Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being

- Engaging in shared rituals and routines can help children feel a sense of normalcy, even during stressful times. For example, taking time to celebrate a birthday or holiday can give children a break from otherwise stressful times. In addition, such celebrations can help foster the bond between parents and children and create positive memories of their own.
- When parents decide to introduce children to a new partner, they can also help to foster a strong bond between them by creating rituals within that relationship that are special to the child(ren) and partner.
- Helping parents feel supported and fostering open and positive communications can assist co-parents in working together as a team to meet their child's needs.

Foster a Shared Sense of Couple Identity

While individuals maintain their identities in a healthy relationship, a strong couple relationship is also characterized by a sense of shared meaning and identity as a couple (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). This sense of couple identity, or "we-ness," allows couples to establish who they are together and what defines their couple relationship. For example, couples with a shared sense of identity may strongly value an emphasis on a healthy, active lifestyle or enjoy a daily tradition of watching a favorite television program together. Couples who are able to move from "you and I" to a sense of "us" benefit from the shared unity this provides for their relationship (Honeycutt, 1999).

Identify Shared Values and Goals to Direct the Relationship

Establishing some common ground and loyalty is important as couples learn to share not only their lives but a sense of identity that unites them. What will they be mutually committed to? Values or goals shared by a couple tend to have a binding effect and allow them to focus their relationship in a common direction (Helms-Erikson, 2001; Kaplan & Maddux, 2002). Goals that a couple might establish and share include deciding to save together to purchase a new home, or couples with children might talk about the particular values they want to pass on to their children. Spouses or partners with large differences in their attitudes, values, or goals may run into relationship difficulties because they tend to think about the relationship and its future from different perspectives (Kurdek, 1993).

Engage Together in Common Purposes

The common purposes that unite a couple aid them in forging the sense of couple identity and "we-ness" that can provide lasting stability and satisfaction. The importance of common purposes is further referenced in the *Connect* dimension, but here we suggest that common purposes help to establish the "common ground" a couple needs to



feel they are working together at something larger than themselves. For example, research suggests the stabilizing relationship value of shared religious commitments may reflect this pattern of “common ground” between partners (Call & Heaton, 1997). Also, research on the transition to parenthood shows that couples who are united in their commitment to become parents at a particular time have much more stable relationships than couples who cannot agree on the common purpose of becoming parents (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Lawrence et al., 2008). A marriage or couple relationship allows partners to work together to bring important aims and ideals to life. Couples in healthy marriages have goals and ideals that give their marriages purpose and meaning. A good marriage or couple relationship can be built on the pursuit of any number of worthy goals, such as: raising responsible children; being actively involved in the community, school, or church; caring for the environment; or developing shared talents and using them in the service of others.

Protect the Relationship From Negative or Disruptive Influences

A healthy couple relationship is defined not only by what couples do together, but also to a degree by the things they limit in their relationship. This can include influences both within and outside of the relationship. For example, couples can benefit as they promise to limit negative influences within their relationship, such as using “divorce threats” on each other if relationship challenges occur. Additionally, couples may also benefit as they define limits on outside influences that might affect their relationship, such as efforts by in-laws to speak ill of a partner or spouse. Couples who let others know they are loyal to each other and their relationship send a message their “we-ness” is central in their lives and identity (Honeycutt, 1999). This is an important message to share with extended family members, as discord with in-laws can play a negative and powerful role in marital stability over time (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001). Spouses can show their loyalty to each other and in front of others by keeping promises and confidences, not speaking poorly of their partner, and keeping the intimate details of their relationship to themselves. Other potentially disruptive influences might include infidelity, addiction, or workaholicism. Spouses and relationship partners seek to know that their partner values the couple relationship as a priority over such potential disruptions, and emphasize that such commitment to a spouse is strongly related to their satisfaction in the relationship (Clements & Swensen, 2000). This aspect of a relationship must be balanced to avoid draining time away from the couple relationship. For example, one must be careful not to become overly involved with a co-worker’s problems or limit time spent in individual hobbies.

Cultural Considerations

- Participating in couple-only activities may not be highly valued in all cultures. For example, Skogrand, Hatch, and Singh (2009) found that Latino couples with strong marriages preferred to spend time with the entire family instead of spending time alone as a couple. In fact, the family relationships were considered more important than the couple relationships.
- Friendship also assumes that the relationship between partners is equal. That is not true of couple relationships in all cultures. For example, some couple relationships are not equal in power and often the man has more power than the woman. When that is the case, then time together may be less about friendship, and more about accomplishing tasks.

Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University

Nurture Positive Interactions as Partners

Couples who develop patterns of positive engagement with each other over time benefit from more closeness, greater trust, and resiliency in times of relationship difficulties (Karney & Bradbury, 2000). This aspect illustrates the application of constructs previously discussed in other dimensions, such as *Choose* (e.g., demonstrating commitment; focusing on strengths) and *Care* (e.g., taking a positive orientation). Both partners in a relationship commit to establishing continual patterns of positive interactions and developing supportive exchanges of affection and intimacy. Cycles of negative interaction can dramatically harm a couple relationship while couples who establish continuing patterns of positive interaction tend to be much more happy and stable in their relationships (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Recommended practices focus on developing positive and reciprocal exchanges of love with one’s partner.

Talk With Each Other and Learn to Communicate in Supportive Ways

Good, supportive communication is often the lifeblood of a meaningful and close relationship. Communication itself is central to our interactions with others. Research has long suggested that quality communication matters in marriage, particularly for women (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Thomas, 1990). Research also suggests that it is not how much talking

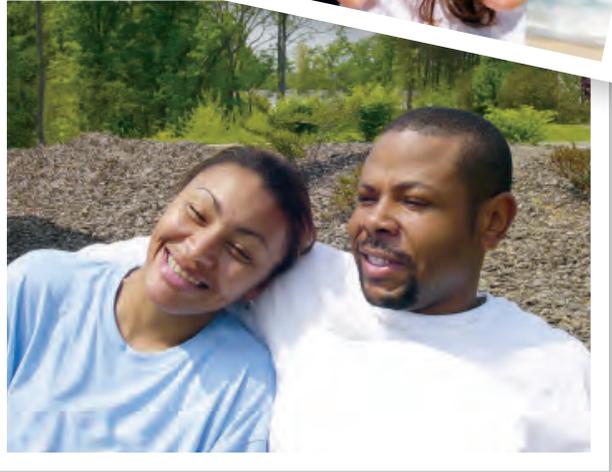
occurs that strengthens a couple friendship, but rather if each person is satisfied with his/her own and his/her partner's level of communication (Erickson, 1993; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991). Additionally, it is critical that a partner feels listened to and understood (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1997). Real, genuine communication makes it possible for a partner to feel cared for and listened to and assures them that their thoughts and ideas have been clearly understood.

- *Non-verbal communication is as important as what is said.* Communication is the process or way we transfer information and feelings between each other so that it is received and understood. A smile, a hug, a kind word, an angry stare, a wink across the room, a warm tone – all of these actions combine with our words to either build up or tear down a relationship. It is important that each partner is careful about how they communicate information and feelings to each other. Non-verbal communication refers to messages sent and received through non-verbal means such as gestures, touch, body posture, facial expressions, or eye contact. Research with couples suggests that most information about a relationship “is contained in the nonverbal behavior that accompanies verbal messages” and the success of spousal efforts to negotiate issues in the relationship “depends on the spouses’ accuracy in decoding each other’s nonverbal communication” (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 35). In essence, spouses who are able to accurately understand the message a partner is communicating when using nonverbal skills and also how a partner will perceive a message tend to have higher levels of marital satisfaction (Burlison & Denton, 1997). A spouse can increase the effectiveness of communication by clearly linking verbal and nonverbal messages, such as saying “I love you” and also smiling at a partner and squeezing his or her arm affectionately at the same time.
- *Filters can affect the way we communicate.* Having a bad day, feeling hungry or tired, or just being frustrated can cause an individual to take any type of communication the wrong way. In other words, an individual’s current mental and emotional state can create a negative filter, which distorts the way we send or receive messages. A person’s positive mood can also act as such a filter (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Each partner should be careful how their mood affects how they send and receive communication. For example, if a spouse had a busy day at work and skipped lunch and is both hungry and irritable upon arriving home,

he might ask to postpone communication about kids’ homework until after a meal and some brief down time. Also, communicating about feelings and moods can let each partner know how their messages may be received. A spouse might say, “Hey, I just finished a really frustrating phone call with my sister. I might listen better if you want to discuss finances if we can wait for an hour or two until I calm down a bit.”

- *Share helpful messages.* Supportive communication also includes being an active listener and only giving helpful messages and abstaining from unhelpful messages. An unhelpful message may include giving advice, sharing personal experiences, shutting down the partner’s feelings, or correcting the person’s account. In contrast, helpful messages include acknowledging the partner’s feelings and pain and inviting more discussion. Research with couples indicates that social support is a powerful factor in helping spouses to deal with times of distress and maintain marital satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Helpful messages that convey empathy and support can include careful listening, affirming a person’s feelings, showing affection, and being responsive to requests for assistance (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004).





Cultivate and Express Appreciation for Each Other in the Relationship

William James, the father of modern psychology, once stated that “the deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated” (James, 1900). In a couple’s friendship, trust is established and maintained as partners feel respect and appreciation. Research suggests two simple but powerful ways to cultivate and express appreciation between partners in a couple relationship: (1) look for and see positive qualities in a companion, then express and remember them, and (2) seek to maintain a positive view of one’s partner when challenges occur. Psychologist John Gottman calls this “nurturing the fondness and admiration system” couples have for each other (2004, p. 61). How individuals think about their partner can dramatically affect how they feel about their partner – so think positive. These attitudes and behaviors are reinforced in the dimensions of *Choose* and *Care*. Importantly, and specific to the principle of *Share*, expressing positive thoughts and feelings with each other strengthens the couple friendship (Gottman, 2004). Examples of this practice might include always acknowledging a gift from a partner or discussing positive ways that each partner enriches the relationship.

Develop Positive and Mutual Exchanges of Love and Affection

The formation of a trusting companionship rests largely upon a couple’s ability to share positive exchanges of love and establish a high degree of mutual trust with each other. While individual partners in the relationship have the responsibility of fostering positivity (see *Care*), the partners together must reciprocate positive exchanges. The balance between positive and negative exchanges in couple relationships has been called the “magic ratio.” Research suggests that it is the balance between positive moments of support or

Working with Youth

- Adolescents can be helped to build skills toward healthy sharing in romantic relationships through what they learn in their family relationships and friendships. They also can be taught and shown that healthy romantic relationships have at their core a friendship between the partners (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006).
- Provide opportunities for youth to discover their values and interests. Having clarity about one's values and interests increases the likelihood of meeting and forming relationships with others who share similar values and interests. Shared values and interests offer a strong foundation for a solid friendship.
- Focus on the development of interpersonal competence. Effective sharing of one's views and feelings are facilitated with interpersonal skills. Adolescents vary in their interpersonal competence (Paulk, Pittman, Kerpelman, & Adler-Baeder, 2011). Interpersonal competence is comprised of skills (e.g., listening, clear communication, effective conflict management) that can be taught.
- Sometimes adolescents may feel uncomfortable sharing their feelings with another person or they may lack the capacity to detect when they are sharing too much about themselves too quickly. It is important to teach adolescents about appropriate levels of self-disclosure. Based on how well another person is known, and the trust that has been developed in the relationship, the amount of self-disclosure in which the adolescent should engage varies (Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008).
- Encourage youth to choose friends and dating partners who facilitate their feeling good about themselves. Sharing positive experiences together, and supporting each other when challenges arise are how relationships help sustain an individual's emotional health. In contrast, when friends and dating partners engage in actions that diminish one's self-esteem and capacity to cope, such relationships are detrimental to the health of the individual.
- Youth need opportunities to practice skills for building and maintaining friendships. This is particularly important for youth who have problems establishing and sustaining healthy close relationships.



affection and negative moments of callousness in relationships that highly predict a relationship's success. In stable marriages and relationships, there tend to be four or five positive exchanges for every negative interaction, thus filling the relationship with positive feelings and energy (Gottman, 1994). Dr. John Gottman has noted, "Your marriage [or relationship] needs much more positivity than negativity to nourish your love. Without it, your relationship is in danger of withering and dying . . . positivity acts as a nutrient, nurturing the affection and joy that are crucial if your love is to weather the rough spots" (Gottman, 1994, p. 58). A spouse can take individual action to generate positive interactions by intentionally doing something positive for a partner, but also by being attentive to and responding with support or love when a partner reaches out in a small way for connection. This behavior is commonly referred to as making a "bid for connection" (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Facilitating positive and mutual exchanges with a partner can range from verbal expressions of love to acts of service or acceptance of a habit that bothers you. Specific examples of this may include remembering to say "I love you" and briefly connecting with a partner before leaving the home or exchanging simple notes of appreciation once a week.

Contributed by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman, Professor and Extension Specialist, Auburn University



Conclusion

Research shows that couples who establish loving interactions and work to maintain those efforts rather than drifting into ambivalence do much better over time in their relationships (Huston, Coughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). Thus, it is what a couple *shares* – of themselves, with each other, and together – that largely defines the quality and value of their relationship as a couple. Indeed, a wealth of research studies demonstrate that a consistent effort by both spouses over time to show affection, focus on positive interactions, and be open and supportive very strongly predicts both marital satisfaction and quality (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Huston, Coughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000; Szinovacz, 1996). A stable and lasting friendship is central to how most couples define what kind of relationship they want and why the relationship is valued. Friendship is not simply about love for each other, but about liking and trusting each other (Sternberg & Barnes, 1988). Rather than living “alone together” (Amato et al., 2007), couples can share the richness of a deep and loving relationship as they develop a close friendship, nurture positive interactions with each other, build a meaningful sense of couple identity, and spend meaningful time in each other’s presence.

Implications for Practice



- Motivate couples to find opportunities to spend meaningful time together on a daily basis through continued courtship and shared couple activities.
- Have each partner list 10 activities or interests that he or she finds most meaningful and enjoyable. If couples need help, brainstorm with them or provide them with a list of potential activities, interests, and hobbies they can participate in together. Ask partners to share their lists with each other and encourage them to support each other’s involvement in some of the pursuits.
- Foster a shared sense of couple identity by asking couples to list and discuss routines and rituals that give meaning to them as a couple and family.
- Facilitate opportunities for couples to engage in common purposes that are meaningful to them, such as service opportunities or expressions of their lives together.
- Ask couples to define the boundaries for their relationship. What behaviors will they limit in their interactions with each other? What are boundaries they feel would benefit their relationship and commitment to each other?
- Educate couples about healthy and constructive communication patterns versus unhealthy and negative communication patterns. Help them understand the importance of sending clear (not mixed messages) through their verbal and non-verbal communication. Have couples practice sharing helpful responses and using active listening skills.



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