

Bridging the Affection Gap

Walter J. Stone

Matt had just replaced the rear tires on the car. Smiling as he entered the apartment, he called out, "Robin, I'm finished!" His wife was in the bathroom scouring the sink. She had yet to scrub the bathtub.

Matt looked in on her and repeated, "I'm finished."

Robin shoved her hair back. "That's nice."

"How about dropping this stuff and taking a ride with me? I need to check the tires."

"I'm in the middle of cleaning. Can't it wait?"

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun. You can finish this later."

"No, thanks. You go ahead without me."

This interchange probably took less than two or three minutes, but it reveals a great deal about the couple. Matt wanted to take Robin on a surprise ride—to him, that would be a spontaneous display of affection. Robin felt a spotless sink and bathtub would please Matt—to her, that would be a sign of affection that showed her commitment.

Matt expected some appreciation for changing the tires, a thank-you perhaps. Robin couldn't understand why her work seemed insignificant enough that her husband would interrupt it so readily.

Instead of feeling loved and appreciated, both felt annoyed and rejected. This is especially unfortunate because their intentions were good. Each thought they were pleasing the other by doing something for the family.

Too many couples are in the same predicament as Matt and Robin: They have difficulty showing and receiving affection. Matt and Robin want to be appreciated, and they think they are showing appreciation, yet their efforts go unnoticed or, even worse, are rejected.

Showing affection can be quite simple, and a great many couples do it naturally and effectively. Other couples, though, establish an affection gap and become frustrated. Following are seven suggestions from people who have effectively dealt with the affection gap in their lives:

Define affection. Like most couples, Matt and Robin grew up experiencing different ways to give and receive love. When they married, they discovered that they did not agree entirely on what affectionate behavior was. Matt's parents had loved to do things together spontaneously. Robin's mother had liked to keep a clean house, and her father complimented his wife quite often on the house.

Matt and Robin started to narrow the affection gap once they talked about their problem: what they did to show affection and what they expected from each other in terms of affection. This particular couple found it helpful to discuss their behaviors and hopes regularly, though many couples find such a formal approach ineffective. If a couple tries this, they must be careful not to keep track of each other's shortcomings. Whatever the method, though, the key is always the same: effective communication to define affection.

Discuss problem areas. Matt had never understood the connection between affection and his wife's need to keep the house clean. Cleaning was her way of saying, "I care about you." He had seen her housework as an excuse not to do things with him, but a positive discussion about the misunderstanding led him to help more with the cleaning and created more time for them to spend together.

Another couple, Ted and Jean, experienced an affection gap because of Ted's inattention to special events. Each time a birthday or holiday approached, Jean would buy a card or a treat and plan something special. Ted thought that was unnecessary until Jean neglected to do anything for his birthday. That is when they started talking to each other about the importance of affection on special occasions.

Another couple had a more serious problem that threatened their marriage. Linda believed that sharing feelings was important. Her husband, William, resented her prying into his thoughts, particularly when she criticized him for not sharing them. He was shy by nature and felt threatened when she said such things as "You never tell me how you feel" or "Why don't you ever say what you're thinking?" By discussing their problem with a counselor, Linda learned not to criticize William and to find more positive ways to get the feedback from him she needed. On his part, William learned that, for Linda, sharing feelings was an important expression of love. In that context, he decided to be a more active listener and to try to be more open with his thoughts.

Reintroduce humor and play. Two of the things George and Lynne had enjoyed most during their courtship were laughter and spontaneity. After they had been married a while, they began to see those qualities slipping away. They decided to plan some enjoyable activities that wouldn't cost a lot of money. George suggested they set aside a regular time each week to have some fun together, and Lynne volunteered to come up with a few zany ideas for new dates. The reintroduction of humor and play into their marriage was easy, and it added life to their affection.

Give the relationship space to grow. One older couple found that their constant disagreement prevented them from being affectionate. After discussing the problem with a counselor, Daniel realized that he was always trying to win his wife, Vivian, over to his point of view. When Vivian expressed an alternate opinion, he would immediately try to talk her out of it. Over time she stopped expressing her views because she felt it wasn't worth the hassle.

The counselor helped him see that in many cases no one opinion was right. Often there was more than one way to do things, and in cases of disagreement, neither had to adopt the other's position. Once the couple began allowing each other to have separate opinions, they became more affectionate.

Anne and Michael had a problem with resenting each other, and their expressions of affection became fewer and fewer. Eventually, they sought the help of a professional therapist. They found that while Michael did not need much time alone, Anne needed up to a full hour a day to herself. The couple had two small children who demanded much of their mother's time, and Anne needed an occasional break.

Anne began to plan her children's naps and playtime with other children more carefully to give her some free time, and Mike helped out in the evening. They set aside one night a week to be alone and took turns tending the children. They also began giving each other time together without children or friends. By allowing each other to grow individually, they stopped resenting each other's attempts at affection.

Decide to be tender. Anthony grew up in a stern home. The parents rarely hugged each other or held hands. The father was rough and sometimes abusive. When Anthony met Diane, he immediately noticed her warmth and compassion and was able to treat her kindly. After marriage, however, Diane noticed a change. Anthony became distant and unforgiving of small mistakes. After one particularly distressing incident that brought Diane to tears, Anthony determined on his own to be tender. Though it was difficult, he began to hug her often and tried to be compassionate, responsive, mild-mannered, and forgiving. His efforts gradually became more natural, and their marriage blossomed.

Accept each other's weaknesses. Like many couples, Paul and Becky had become irritated at several of each other's habits and criticized each other occasionally. One morning Paul mentioned that he felt unlovable. For the rest of the day, Becky thought about that, then brought up the subject again in the evening. After some discussion, they decided to "catch each other at their best." If Paul did something that pleased Becky, she would let him know by a kiss, a note, or some other expression of affection. Likewise, Paul would look for things Becky did that pleased him. The annoying habits quickly lost their importance—they could accept each other's weaknesses by focusing on each other's strengths.

Follow the Savior's example. The Lord preached a gospel filled with affection. He encourages us to strengthen our relationships "by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

"By kindness and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy and without guile." (D&C 121:41–42.)

He also showed us the way. He was affectionate and forgiving to those he met. He gathered children to him and blessed them. (See Matt. 19:13–15; 3 Ne. 17:12, 21.) Though he could have healed the sick with only a command, he often chose closer interaction that strengthened faith and demonstrated his concern: he touched the ears of the deaf, the eyes of the blind, and the mouths of the

dumb. (See Matt. 9:29–30; Mark 7:32–35; John 9:6–7.) He washed the feet of his disciples. (See John 13:4–5.)

He also received affection graciously. He did not rebuff the woman who bathed his feet with her tears and anointed them with oil. (See Luke 7:37–39, 43–47.) Even Judas, who betrayed the Lord with a kiss, was greeted kindly. (See Matt. 26:47–50.) The Lord exemplified the fact that giving and receiving affection is necessary in all relationships.

Affection is among the sweetest gospel principles to put into practice. With gentleness it softens the painful and sorrowful parts of life and bonds a marriage with kindness and joy.

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