

LIFE live it well

Relationship counsellors – and married couple – **Matt and Sarah Davies** have helped over 2,000 people find lasting love. Here they share their exclusive toolkit for success

When it comes to our wardrobes, we wouldn't dream of wearing the same clothes all year round. Instead we adapt what we wear each day according to our needs and the season. Yet when it comes to our relationships, we often take a one-size-fits-all approach, doing the same things out of habit throughout our lives.

And over time, this can lead us to feel disconnected from the people we love. Relationship therapists and husband and wife team Matt and Sarah Davies are on a mission to change that.

Married for 23 years, they have a 19-year-old son and live in London. Between them have helped more than 2,000 people – Matt as Harley Street relationship therapist, and Sarah as a couples therapist who specialises in movement and helps people be more in touch with their body.

It's safe to say what they don't know about keeping that spark alive isn't worth knowing. Together, they have developed an exclusive toolkit that aims to help couples feel intimately connected, supported and resilient to

What the love therapists REALLY want you to know

struggles in relationships.

"They're things we use at home as well as with our clients so we know they really work," says Sarah, 54.

The key, they say, is adapting to each other's changing needs.

"It's the process of checking in with each other and being open and vulnerable which creates intimacy," adds Matt, 59.

Here they share their secrets to lasting love.

Look for the positives

When you first meet your partner, you tend to only see the positive things about them. But as time goes on, more and more negative observations creep into your mind. This is because the brain has a negative bias and is very adept at finding problems.

It's useful to notice the things that are positive about your

relationship and magnify them in your mind. Over time, this trains the brain to start looking at things that are going well, as well as things that aren't.

Try! Each day, list three things that you appreciate about your partner, and ask them to do the same. When times are difficult, there may be nothing to say, so this exercise will help you check the state of your relationship, too.

See how this changes after doing this exercise daily for a few weeks.

Are you an octopus or a turtle?

When you and your partner are in conflict, do you like to reach out and try to resolve the problem (an octopus), or withdraw and reflect on it (a turtle)?

If you're an octopus, it can help to learn to withdraw a little and seek emotional support elsewhere when times are tough, for instance by talking

about the issue with family or friends. This gives your partner much-needed space, and also helps build trust that they will come back to you when they've had a think.

Meanwhile, it can help the turtle to talk to their partner rather than trying to deal with problems on their own.

Try! Think about your conflict type and keep this in mind next time you feel distant from one another.

Take a criticism holiday

Often in long-term relationships, criticising one another becomes an unconscious habit. But there is something bigger happening here.

Usually, criticism is a protest because one person feels there is a lack of emotional connection between them and their partner. Yet, the other person sees it as an attack and withdraws. They don't understand that behind the anger

is a desire for connection. Taking a break from criticism can help both people come back together again.

Try! Take a criticism holiday, and agree not to criticise each other for a whole day. Remember that criticism is about wanting a deeper connection.

Look for unfinished business

We often moan to our partners about things they do or say that irritate us. If the same moans come up time and time again, there may be an unresolved issue such as niggles about a shared home, chores or childcare.

These niggles may need some further exploration. Be honest about what is bothering you both about the situation. **Try!** Allow yourself just three moans a day, and use them wisely. After this, try to keep your negative emotions to yourself, or speak to someone else about them.

Stop problem solving

Couples often try to solve one another's

problems. Often, one partner will come to the other for support, for instance because they've had a hard day at work. The other will try to tell them how to solve the problem, instead of listening.

This can leave their partner feeling frustrated and not heard. **Try!** Next time your partner comes to talk to you about an issue, try to really listen. Rather than problem solving, paraphrase what they've told you so far and then say: "Tell me more".

This helps the other person to feel heard and understood.

Refresh your relationship browser

After being in a relationship for a long time, it's easy to think you know the other person inside out.

Yet, often the person you think you know best can change – and you don't want to see it because it makes you feel uncomfortable. Instead you take an image of your partner and fix it, and believe this imaginary person is who you're in a relationship with.

Try! When you wake up each morning, imagine you're meeting your partner for the first time and this is a new relationship. There's always something to learn and be curious about.

Get into the habit of finding out who your partner is now.

Each day, ask a question to help you get to know them better.

Get back in touch Often couples come to us for therapy who never touch or feel intimate. But touch is really important for maintaining a bond. It gives a feeling of safety and security.

Try! When was the last time you touched your partner? If it was a long time ago, think about ways you could get back in touch with each other.

It could be as simple as giving the other person a neck rub, or reaching out to hold hands while you watch TV together. When you are touching your partner, focus on the sensations and how nice it feels.

Give your full attention It's rare to give someone your undivided attention, as they are usually competing with thoughts about work, or distractions from technology.

Studies show that when two people are together, the time lapse between



somebody pointing out something to get their partner's attention, and their partner responding to it, is an indication of the health of their relationship. If your partner often takes several minutes to respond to you when you're speaking to them, it's a danger sign for the relationship.

Try! Next time you and your partner are together, ask yourself whether you're available, responsive and engaged. Try to give them your full attention.

Acknowledge hard times

Sometimes the stress of things, such as rising energy costs, can have a negative impact on a couple.

It's easy to forget that outside pressure can affect your relationship, and to instead think that there's something wrong in the partnership.

If you're facing hard times at the moment, it can help to acknowledge that's going on between the two of you. **Try!** Imagine you're holding hands and looking out at the world, rather than blaming each other, or assuming the difficulties come from within.

■ You, Me And The Space Between Us: How To (Re)Build Your Relationship by Matt and Sarah Davies (£16.99, Lagom) is out now.

INTERVIEW BY ELIZABETH ARCHER



ADVICE
Matt and
Sarah both
work as
counsellors