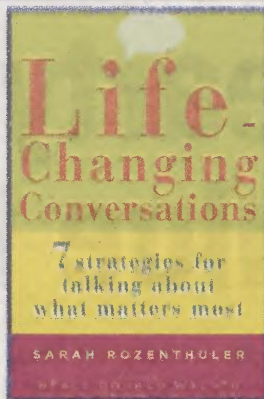




Learning together – trips to galleries and museums can be fun



Sarah Rozenthuler's guide



Cheers – a glass of champers can put the fizz into your love-life

How to keep love in bloom

TALKING POINT

By Liza Radley

Heartfelt declarations of love, candlelit dinners and flower bouquets are some of the traditional ways to mark Valentine's Day.

But what if you're single? Or what if you're in a partnership but secretly feel it could be more loving and fulfilling?

"Relationships need regular care and time and thoughtfulness if they're going to be healthy and stable, and to ensure your partnership survives the inevitable ups and downs of life together," says Sarah Rozenthuler, author of *Life-Changing Conversations: 7 Strategies For Talking About What Matters Most*.

"Romantic or thoughtful gestures to show how much you care should be a regular occurrence and are more important than a showy gift on Valentine's Day," she says.

Rozenthuler gives Weekend her top 10 tips for making your partnership more loving.

1. TECHIE TURN-OFF

Checking emails, making phone calls, watching TV and online surfing eats away at the time you spend together and can often be an excuse for not communicating, says Rozenthuler.

Give yourselves quality time together during which you have a "media break".

Switch off the technology and focus on each other – even if it's only for 10 minutes.

Share views, clear the air, really listen to what your partner has to say, then reflect back what you've heard.

Resist the temptation to interrupt, let them finish their sentences, and always end on a positive note by saying, for instance, 'Thank you for telling me what you feel'.

2. SHARE THE DREAM

A long-lasting relationship is all about standing shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the same direction, says Rozenthuler.

For instance, she points out, when a relationship ends, the most painful part is often the loss of shared dreams.

She suggests strengthening your bond by creating a "vision board" together.

Cut out inspiring images from magazines and create a mounted collage. Place it where you can both see it daily so that you consciously connect with what you want to achieve.

3. SPICE UP YOUR SEX LIFE

If the physical side of your relationship has



Shall we dance – you don't have to be in a nightclub to take a turn on the floor

become routine, take a risk and do something different.

If you're stuck for ideas, ask your partner for a memory of some great sex they had with you and see what you can learn to re-create some of the excitement of the early days of your relationship.

You might need to have a weekend away from the children so you can enjoy being a couple again, or take more time to enjoy the sensual side of sex by massaging each other, talking and relaxing together.

4. MONITOR YOUR MOOD

Partners are susceptible to absorbing each other's moods, which can be positive when one of you has a good day but negative if the other person's bad day at the office contaminates you both.

Develop strategies so you can individually change your mood if you're down in the dumps – it might be a five-minute walk outdoors or listening to uplifting music.

5. HAVE FUN

A relationship can be hard work as you each try to find ways to accommodate the other's needs, wants and desires, Rozenthuler points out. Differences of opinion can cause tension and unresolved conflicts can lead to contempt.

Make a mutual commitment to regularly spend time together doing things that you both enjoy, whether it's trips to the cinema, dance classes or planning a holiday.

6. KEEP THE ROMANCE

Thoughtful gestures and actions needn't cost money or take much time but they'll make your other half feel special and appreciated, she says.

"Cook their favourite meal once a week, run them a bath or play their favourite music," Rozenthuler suggests.

"During your day, bookmark memorable moments in your mind to share with your partner when you get home."

7. INVEST IN RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

If your relationship is riddled with tension, get help, says Rozenthuler.

"Identify what the core issue is and search out ways to deal with it whether that's getting some couple therapy, asking a GP or specialist for help, or reading books which focus on improving relationships," she says.

Relate is the UK's largest provider of relationship counselling and sex therapy. For more information, visit www.relate.org.uk

8. FLY SOLO

Allow yourselves time apart occasionally, she advises. That allows you to be an individual again and to reconnect with your own interests and maybe a separate circle of friends.

It's a tragedy if people lose themselves in a relationship and feel invisible unless they are part of a couple, she says.

If one partner is more dominating the other can end up playing a support role which may erode confidence and wellbeing.

"To avoid this, take regular doses of your own company. Do whatever it takes to stay grounded and aware of your own identity."

9. MAKE THE RULES

Many relationships suffer as a result of one individual making decisions without consulting their partner, says Rozenthuler. "It can leave the other person resentful because they feel their feelings or opinions don't matter."

Any couple can benefit from having a conversation about how they make decisions together. For instance, they might agree that if an item costs more than a certain amount, the decision on whether to buy it must be joint.

Moving from "me" to "we" maximises the likelihood that any decisions taken will reflect both your perspectives.

10. SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE

Expecting a partner to be totally responsible for your happiness is unrealistic, Rozenthuler warns. "Ask yourself how you can evolve into a more contented, fulfilled version of yourself without demanding anything of your partner."

Ideally, being with someone else should enhance you rather than complete you. Try to analyse what you can give to your partnership and not simply what you can take.

Stay in touch with the bigger picture about you and your life together will stop you from retreating to your corner and enable you to help create a life-enhancing relationship.

● *Life-Changing Conversations: 7 Strategies For Talking About What Matters Most* by Sarah Rozenthuler is published by Watkins Publishing, priced £8.99. Available from Amazon and www.sarahrozenthuler.com