

Everything Old is new again

A fresh look at a long-term love can rekindle romantic sparks

By Amy Halloran

What makes old love new? Scientifically speaking, perhaps nothing. New love excites the reward center of the brain, an area that also responds to alcohol and drug use. Long-term love and attachment, however, when observed in the lab, work elsewhere in the mind, in an area associated with emotions. So how, when you're in a relationship that is weathering the test of time, do you rekindle the sparks that started the fires of love?

The answer to this question wasn't on the tip of my friends' and family's tongues.

"Watch *Desperate Housewives*," my best friend joked. This is the 10th year he's been in love with the man who is now his husband. But if watching racy, raunchy TV shows holds no romantic promise for you and your mate, how do you bring back that loving feeling?

Nostalgia is a good route. Think of the things that sparked those fires. For me and my man, Dutch gin was a tonic. When we met, I had a bottle of Genever I bought in the airport in Amsterdam. He knew and liked this syrupy, liquerish brand of gin, which became an emblem of our beginnings. Genever is no longer sold in the United States, as far as we can tell, so we have to resort to other ingestives that remind us of our first days together: corn pancakes, which I made from corn on the cob that was in his refrigerator, and the Cornelian Cherry syrup we poured on top of them. The syrup made me think he was long-term material because his domestic skills outdid mine. Though I've since taken over preparing this concoction, we still harvest the garnet fruit together. Just thinking about these foods makes me feel fondly toward my mate.

Another route we've pursued toward rekindling is not as easily applicable. When my husband suffered an on-the-job injury, we had a honeymoon in the hospital. While the hospitalizations and recovery were lengthy and stressful, the crisis made us drop the emotional shorthand we'd developed in our relationship. He joked about offering Trauma Introduction Service Kits (TISK) to reignite romance, or jump-start people stalled at midlife.

Of course, you can find novelty in love without going to the hospital. Try new foods, sports, or books. If you always watch TV, play a board game instead. If you always work after dinner, take a night off and work on each other. You will feel like other people because of the change from routine. The feeling might be strange, but that's good. Shut your eyes and tell each other something that means a lot to you. Go out on a limb and reveal yourself. Hold hands. Sing lullabies.

For a really cheap date with big potential, pretend you're renovating a room. Surveying paint-color names is pretty wild. If "Heartthrob," "Ardent Coral," or "Ablaze," and the colors they correspond to, don't tickle your mutual fancy in one way, perhaps you and your mate will get a kick out of the suggestive word pairings. Maybe you'll both be amused in the way you used to be, back when you were discovering the unique ways your hearts locked together and you thought the two of you could create your own island within the world.

If couples I quizzed were stumped about how to name the elements that keep love alive, advice on what *not* to do flowed. Figure out what habits of yours are completely untenable to your lover. Don't go to bed angry. Don't be shy about sprinkling verbal endearments. Don't forget to hug.

These things sound simple, but once you have a dedicated partner, your interests move to other, more pressing pursuits, like earning a living, maintaining a household, or digging into personal hobbies or charitable causes. That's why it's necessary to find excuses to remember, and rediscover, why you love the person you do.



Valentine's Day is a good time to reconfigure romantic habits. Take the traditional elements and reframe your celebration:

- Don't just get a bag of dark chocolate, but capitalize on the neurochemical it contains, dopamine, which is also lively in the brain areas that are stimulated by lust and new love. Build a new memory: hide the chocolates in the sofa and administer them during a lengthy make-out session.
- Make an at-home restaurant: Get a cookbook from the library, and plot out a wonderful meal. Do every bit of the work for the feast together, from shopping to licking the whisk from the whipping cream.
- Invite your mate to meet you for coffee in the afternoon. Interview him or her the way you used to before you knew the names of siblings, and had a chance to forget his or her cousins. Compose a list of things you might not know: worst childhood memory, worst adult memory, best adult and childhood memories. What did you want to be as a grown-up when you were 5? When you were 10? Where did you dream of traveling? Listen to your mate. Respond to the responses. Practice, if necessary, responsiveness beforehand; watch yourself in the mirror as you pretend to listen. Can you hold your lover's gaze? Can you still believe that he or she is the only person in the room worth hearing?

In short, make a moment. Take a moment to look sideways at the person who shares your pillows. There is so much more to know than you think. Seeking new information can cement new interactions, and turn on that center of the brain that was doing somersaults 10, 20, or 40 years ago. Intimacy happens.