

Words Maryann Hammers
Illustration Ali Douglass

Q + A

How to respond to a friend's cutting comments, what to do if your husband withholds affection and the best way to support a friend in need.



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—Jeff Palitz, therapist

Q Over the last few years my husband has stopped being affectionate with me. How can I get him to realize how much I miss simple gestures—him just holding my hand or putting his arms around my waist—without putting him on the defensive?

That’s a common problem among couples who’ve been together awhile. “After people have been married for a while, there is a tendency to set the cruise control and coast,” says Jeff Palitz, a marriage and family therapist who practices in San Diego.

Palitz believes you should tell your husband what you’re missing. “Dropping hints won’t do it. Passive, roundabout questions won’t either,” he says. “No one likes to ask, and you may feel he should already know what you want. But men often feel that in the absence of information to the contrary, everything is fine. No matter how long you have been married, you have to assume that he has no idea what you are thinking or feeling unless you tell him.”

Start by approaching your husband in a direct yet positive way: “I always loved it when you held my hand or put your arm around me, and I really miss it.”

Then follow up with something like, “I am bringing this up because I love you and I know our marriage is important to you,” or “I want to make sure that we talk about this so I don’t start to feel resentful.”

“The idea is to create a team approach to improving intimacy. In other words this is not just about something he is not doing and it cannot be left solely up to him to fix it,” Palitz says. I also recommend you both take a look at Alex Lluch’s new book, *Simple Principles for a Happy and Healthy Marriage* (WS Publishing, 2008, \$9.95). It addresses why loving gestures and contact are so essential to a successful romantic partnership.

Remember: Don’t ever punish your partner by withholding affection—even if you’re angry. “Loving contact can help you recover from many disagreements,” Lluch says. “Your time as a couple can get pushed aside to make room for work, errands and child-rearing. But marriages placed on the back burner tend to overcook and spoil.”

Q I just received the devastating news that a good friend is facing a life-threatening illness. How can I best support her? What are the right words or actions that provide the most comfort and encouragement?

I’m sorry to hear about your friend. As far as how to support her during this time, the best thing you can do is to reach out to her, says Sharon Langshur, M.D., cofounder of *CarePages.com*, an online support community for patients and caregivers.

“Often we feel uncomfortable addressing someone who is ill. We are concerned about intruding inappropriately, calling at the wrong time or saying the wrong thing. So we back away, which worsens the person’s feeling of isolation,” says Langshur, who cowrote the book *We Carry Each Other: Getting Through Life’s Toughest Times* (Conari Press, 2007, \$16.95).

For additional guidance I recommend you take a look at *Final Conversations: Helping the Living and the Dying Talk to Each Other* by Maureen Keeley and Julie Yingling (Vanderwyk & Burnham, 2007, \$24.95). “Ask what you can do to help,” says Keeley, a communications professor at Texas State University. “Offer to buy groceries, do laundry, clean house, pay bills or make meals, depending on the situation. Perhaps you can take her on an outing—lunch or a movie—or she may want your company when she goes for a treatment.”

Keeley also offers a few tips on what not to do: Don’t pretend it isn’t happening. Don’t avoid the topic. Don’t avoid her. Don’t dismiss her fears. Don’t tell her what to do or offer unsolicited advice.

“If it seems like she needs her space, then back off a bit but continue to check in with her—how often depends on how close the two of you are,” Keeley advises. “People deal with illnesses, death, fear, anger and pain differently. Let her dictate how much she can do and emotionally handle. Regular contact lets your friend know that you value her.”

“You won’t regret the investment of time when your friend is no longer with you.”

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