

# Missing the Partner You See 24/7

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One night last week, I looked up from my phone, turned to my husband in bed and said, “Why do I feel like I miss you even though you’re in my face 24/7?” In our 15 years as a couple, we have never spent so much time in the same space as we have the last four months, but we have a hard time actually connecting — there are no dates, no involved conversations, no adventures.

I find myself thinking back to an experiment carried out by a married couple and written about at Slate, the website where I used to work. In 2008, they spent a day tethered together by a 15-foot string, never leaving each other’s side nor consciousness. At the end of the day they had nothing to say to each other.

“We don’t have any stories to tell each other about our day because we lived the same day,” wrote David Plotz, the husband in the story and a dear friend of mine. “We don’t have questions for each other because we know the answers. We can’t lie and exaggerate and twist the day’s happenings to gain sympathy — the usual evening activity for most married couples, I suspect — because the other will call foul.”

This is every day now, for many couples.

Because I would like to find new ways to feel warmly toward my husband, rather than just passing him in the hallway like a co-worker at the world’s most existentially depressing office, I talked to two therapists and the author of a best-selling book about relationships, to see what we could do to find some room for ourselves.

**Cultivate excitement.** Though that might feel impossible during quarantine, “there’s research that novelty can enhance your romantic relationship,” said Jancee Dunn, a frequent NYT Parenting contributor and the author of “How Not to Hate Your Husband After Kids.” “When you’re trying something new, with someone you’re attracted to, the ensuing adrenaline can mimic the rush of first love physiologically,” she explained.

Dunn mentioned an experiment where one group of 50 couples was encouraged to participate in exciting activities for 90 minutes a week for four weeks. The control group of 51 couples had no intervention. The couples who had done the novel activities together reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction, and not just after that four-week period was over, they still reported higher levels of satisfaction four months later.

But how the heck does one cultivate excitement when you can barely leave the house? I realized last week that I was taking two showers a day simply because the bathroom was a change of scenery from the bedroom, where I both work and sleep. But it can be done, said Sinead Smyth, a licensed marriage and family therapist. She mentioned a couple she knew who bonded over planning future travel — they got excited about creating a vision board for a trip to India

someday. They knew that day wasn't coming any time soon, but it gave them a new activity to do, and hope for the future.

Be intentional about your time together. While alone time may be in short supply, there are ways to make even 30 minutes a day special, said Wale Okerayi, a licensed mental health counselor currently in Houston. For example, you could feed the kids dinner early, put them in front of the TV, and have a solo picnic together in the yard, she said (or just in another room if a yard is not an option). Dunn noted that she and her husband have started doing yoga, "which is so cliché," she said — but it makes them happy, and they have little inside jokes about the virtual yoga instructor.

Even picking out a show to watch together can be a bonding experience, Okerayi said. And my husband and I had the best time we've had in months watching live comedy over Zoom last week.

**Open up about how hard this is.** Smyth said that many people are experiencing a feeling of "ambiguous loss," because of the pandemic. There are so many parts of our lives that have changed without our consent, and we may be feeling a kind of grief about it. Some people may not want to complain to their partners about these bad feelings, because they "don't want to burden them or add more stress," she said. But if you don't honestly share these feelings then you may feel a sense of disconnect, Smyth said. (I personally have zero problem complaining, but that's just me).

If your partner comes to you with this sense of loss or anxiety over changes beyond our control, that's a moment where you can try to affirm those feelings and be uplifting, Okerayi said. You can talk about difficult moments from your past as a couple and talk about how you got through them together. Even if all you can muster is five minutes of affection at the end of a long day, that can go a long way.