

Cross-Cultural Worker Marriage Issues: Relationship Time

As we saw in the first brochure in this series, Dorothy and William certainly did not spend time on their relationship during the final dozen years of their marriage while she was mentally ill and accusing him of adultery. It is unlikely that they did during the decade before he was a pastor and cross-cultural worker. William was so consumed with pastoral and agency work that he had little time left for anyone in his family.

Most people in cross-cultural service today are not that blatant about ignoring their family, at least not in statements about their priorities. Most cross-cultural workers say that their relationship with God is their top priority, but their priority order after that may differ greatly, some putting their ministry second while others put family second.

However, even those who say that spouse and children are their next priorities may not “walk the talk,” may not live what they say. Let us consider the real order of a person’s priorities and relationship time. Here are the “who, what, when, where, and why” of such time.

What?

Many cross-cultural workers say that their relationship with God is their top priority but do not have time for daily devotions. Likewise they may say that their relationship with their spouse is their second priority but do not have time to spend with him or her. Though people differ greatly in talent, intelligence, income, and so forth, everyone has the same

amount of time, 24 hours in every day, 7 days in every week and 52 weeks in every year. One can see the real order of a person’s priorities by looking at how that person spends time.

Every relationship takes time to maintain. We may marvel at the wonderful relationship a person has with God and wonder how it happens. Then we find that the person daily spends much time in the Word and in prayer. Likewise, for spouses to have a wonderful relationship, they need to regularly spend time together. This is relationship time, a regularly scheduled time when they can do things that they both enjoy together. This is not a “problem-solving” time for their relationship, but a positive, stress-free time for them as a couple.

Why?

The author of Hebrews (2:1) gives the general principle that people who do not pay careful attention tend to drift away. Though that writer was talking about the truth those people had heard, it is also valid for relationships both divine and human. People who neglect their relationship with God tend to drift away from him. People who do not “pay more careful attention” to their relationships with each other tend to drift apart.

The people that author was writing to were not rejecting what they had heard, just neglecting it. Likewise, one does not have to reject God or other people to drift apart. Spouses who do not regularly maintain their marriages find themselves drifting apart. Such maintenance takes time, relationship time.

Who?

Husbands and wives of all ages must have time alone to maintain their marriages. Of course, they want to spend time with their children, friends, colleagues, nationals, and may want to talk with a pastor or counselor. However, relationship time is a time for them to be alone together without interruption. Here are some guidelines.

- Children sleeping, gone to school, or with a baby sitter
- Cell phones and pagers turned off, not even on vibrate
- Telephone off the hook or silenced so the call can go to the answering machine (turned so low that the call cannot be heard)
- Doorbell ignored (with blinds pulled so that potential visitors cannot see you are home)
- If in “public,” a place where you can be “alone” as a couple, such as a table or booth far back in a restaurant

By definition relationship time is time to be alone without interruption or distraction.

When?

The time of day or day(s) of the week makes no difference. The important thing is that it be regular, long enough for both partners, and “carved in stone” on both schedules. That means that if a committee meeting is scheduled during your relationship time, your answer is “I have something on my schedule then. I’ll see if I can change that.” Then you change it only if your spouse is in full agreement (no pressure).

The time can be daily or weekly, and which is best often depends on the family situation and personal preferences. One

spouse may not want to miss particular television programs. That spouse is saying, “My watching _____ for a couple hours each week is more important than my relationship with you.” Or, “my watching the news for half an hour every day is more important than my relationship with you.” They may not say it in those words, but as we all know “Actions speak louder than words.”

Some couples prefer to spend one larger block of time (at least two hours, preferably more) together during the week. Others prefer spending a shorter time together each day. Here are some examples.

- Date night every Thursday evening with a sitter taking care of the children
- Tennis and lunch every Saturday
- Ample cuddling time every morning before getting out of bed
- Reading books aloud and talking together about them before falling asleep at night

The point is that it does not matter when you carve out a space for each other; all that matters is that you do it at the best time for both of you in your situation.

Where?

Where you spend the time together is irrelevant as long as you can have uninterrupted time alone. Where you meet depends on cost and what you want to do together. Some places are free, and you may want to go there most of the time and then occasionally go to places that cost something. Here are some places that people have met.

- Somewhere in your home (the most common place)
- A park
- A restaurant
- Swimming pool
- A hotel lobby

- A lake or river
- Tennis courts
- Hiking trail
- Coffee shop

Again the point is that it does not matter where you meet; all that matters is that you do so at a place that both of you enjoy.

How?

How you spend your time together is again up to you, as long as you do something that you both enjoy. Remember that this is not a problem-solving time that you come to dread each day or week. If you have problems that need to be solved, set aside a different time to work on those and ignore them during your relationship time; let them temporarily be the “elephant in the room” that no one is talking about.

Relationship time is not a time for complaining; rather it is a time for building each other up. It is all right to apologize by saying, “I’m sorry I _____” as long as there is no expectation or pressure for a similar apology from the other spouse. It is not a time for sex, unless both spouses want it (no pressure put on either).

Relationship time is a time for interacting with each other. That is why dinner together or a walk in the park is better than a movie or a concert where others in the audience discourage conversation and the focus of attention is the entertainment. Here are some activities people do.

- Read and discuss books or articles
- Play a table game together
- Climb a hill and look out over a valley
- Canoe on a river or lake
- Skate on a rink or sidewalk
- Pray together in a quiet place
- Feed the birds

- Watch an informal athletic event
- Shoot hoops
- People-watch in a park

Of course, these are all rather traditional. Many books and websites have ideas for more “creative dates.” Such times together may include such things as the following.

- Washing the car together (as long as it includes lots of throwing and spraying water on each other)
- Riding up and down every elevator in town
- Playing hide and seek together in the backyard (when one finds the other, you can hide together in the same bushes—from no one in particular)
- Taking a pile of paper to the park and seeing who can make the plane that will fly the “funniest”
- Skipping rocks on the lake to see who can get the most skips
- Flying a kite, one you have made yourselves
- Driving Go-Karts or bumper cars at a local amusement park
- Doing some karaoke singing together and laughing a lot
- Pretending it is Easter and coloring eggs together
- Picking fruit together at a local orchard
- Window-shopping together at a nice mall

Again, the possibilities are limited only to what you can imagine. What matters is that you are having fun doing something you both enjoy so that you can talk and laugh together.

I have come more and more to realize the truth in what the professor said in my first psychology class. “Couples who do not talk regularly about how they feel about their

relationship drift further and further apart regardless of how close they think they are.”

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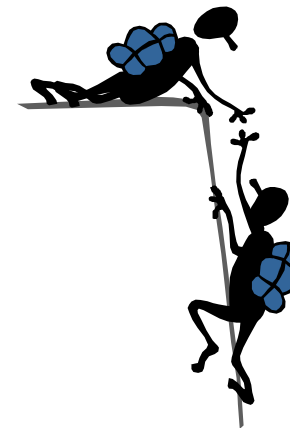
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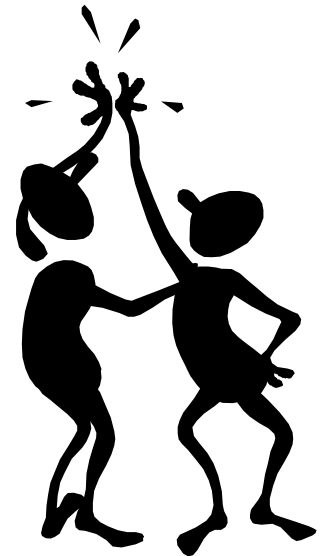
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