

Instead of focusing on material gifts this year, focus on intangible gifts you can give to your spouse.



gifts of self

All he wants for Christmas is you

By Julie de Azevedo Hanks, LCSW

Finding the perfect gift for your spouse is an exciting part of the holiday season. But fighting crowds to snag one of the latest must-have items and squeezing money out of a tight budget can make gift-giving stressful. While I wouldn't mind a new iPad under the tree this year, (listening, Santa?) the best gifts are those that don't require money, but require thought and time and emotional awareness.

Though it's fun to shop and wrap gifts, we

ultimately all wish for the same emotional gifts from our spouses. Things that can't be purchased—gifts of self. We long for reassurance that we are loved and cherished, for comfort when we are sad or hurt or scared, and for validation that our experience matters to the person we love the most. Even if your husband doesn't have the words to express these wishes, he longs for the same emotional gifts too.

What do gifts of self look like in real life?

Here are some ideas of how you can spend less money and give more enduring and meaningful gifts to your husband this year.

The Gift of Emotions

TELL YOUR EMOTIONAL TRUTH

Too often, in an effort not to hurt your spouse's feelings, you may have stopped expressing your full range of emotions—

your hurts, your fears, your anger, your joys, and your dreams.

"I don't want to be a nag," or "It's not Christ-like to be mad" are common phrases I hear in my therapy office as reasons women stop expressing themselves. It's helpful to consider that intimacy means "into-me-see" or see into me. True intimacy requires a deep level of emotional honesty and the tender expression of a full range of emotions—not just the good, happy, nice ones. Your thoughts, your feelings, and your expression of them are what make you uniquely you.

ASK FOR WHAT YOU REALLY WANT

Sending clear signals about what you need emotionally from your spouse can be difficult. It requires an internal awareness and a willingness to ask deeper questions that go below the surface. Behind every complaint and criticism you have for your spouse is an emotional plea for closeness. Practice going below the complaint and expressing the emotional need directly.

Instead of saying "You always work so much! Are you going to be working until 8pm forever? I'm sick of eating dinner alone," try saying, "I want to spend more time with you. I'm afraid that I'm not important to you. Can we plan a date night for this weekend?" Trust me. Being direct with your needs is a gift to him.

The Gift of Attention

PUSH THE PAUSE BUTTON

When is the last time you really listened to your spouse? Too often, couples I see in my practice are so busy reacting from their own intense emotions that they completely bypass the emotional meaning of their spouse's expression. In an effort to reach out to his wife during a therapy session John says, "I really miss you—you've been so preoccupied since our son was born. Let's spend some alone time together."

Megan responds defensively, "I'm trying

to be a good mother. You know this is all new for me. I'm overwhelmed and I'm trying to be there for you—can't you see that?"

Megan, flooded by her own emotions missed John's main message of "I miss you. I need you" and she heard some version of "You're not good enough."

If Megan had "paused" her emotions response and slowed down her reaction enough to hear his emotional message she might have said something like, "Oh John, you really miss me and want to spend time together. Thank you for reassuring me of that." Then once John is heard, Megan can share with John how she is feeling about the transition to motherhood and how it is impacting her. Really hearing your spouse and putting your emotions temporarily on hold is truly a gift.

SPEAK HIS LOVE LANGUAGE

Ask your hubby how he feels most loved and learn to be more proficient in his "language." Gary Chapman, author of the *The Five Love Languages*, identified distinct categories of how people experience love: physical touch, words of affirmation, acts of service, quality time, and gifts. Couples often love in their own language instead of in your partner's language.

For example, if your husband's primary love language is acts of service then make a special home-cooked meal or surprise him by doing all of his household chores. If his language is physical touch, actively approach him for a hug and kiss, hold his hand, sit by him, and initiate physical intimacy more often. Offering love in his language will help him feel deeply loved by you.

The Gift of Memories

KEEP TRACK OF THE GOOD STUFF

Write your hubby a handwritten letter yearly for Christmas. I know a couple who did this for a few decades and they now

"AME" for a better marriage

These quick tips will bring positive communication between you and your spouse up to the next level.

ATTENTION

- Pause your emotions and listen
- Speak his love language

MEMORIES

- Write a yearly letter with memories
- Revisit romantic moments from past

EMOTIONS

- Share your full range of emotions
- Ask for what you really need

enjoy a beautiful book containing years of personal expressions celebrating their memories of each year, significant family events, and the evolution of their love. To reflect on tender feelings and focus on the positive memories created through the years will validate that your husband is indeed cherished and loved.

REVISIT ROMANTIC MOMENTS

Holidays are the perfect time to plan a visit to the special places of your early courtship or wedding day. Walk through the park where he proposed, visit the site where you took your marriage vows, or recreate your honeymoon. These can be fun holiday traditions that can reconnect you with the tender feelings that drew you to your spouse in the first place. Even if your husband isn't the most romantic man on the planet, he'll appreciate the gift of reminiscing and recreating these special days that only the two of you shared together.



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