

I remember when my in-laws came upon their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary they fervently declined the request from their children to host a celebration of the event. Being modest and humble rural folk, they didn't want to draw any attention to themselves or create a burden to their children by hosting a reception. I made a special trip to their home to talk to them about it. My own parents, happily married for 30 years until dad's death at the age of 52, did not have the opportunity to celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Throughout their marriage, I knew my mom and dad faced every challenge as best friends and I knew this was a key part of the success for my in-laws, as well. They had reached that 50-year benchmark and I wanted to encourage them to share their success with not only those who cared about them, but those who looked up to them in our community.

*"The three great essentials to achieve anything worthwhile are: hard work, stick-to-itiveness, and common sense."* This quote by Thomas A. Edison, sheds light on the important ingredients for successful relationships. Any meaningful relationship in our life is the result of hard work. We have to be willing to persevere through a variety of challenges and use our common sense in being intentional about maintaining the strength and quality of those relationships. They don't just happen.

In her publication "PeopleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationships" Dr. Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Extension Specialist with K-State Research and Extension, offers insights on what it takes to sustain a long-term relationship (be it friendship, marriage, or both.) She writes:

"People often think that being married for a long time, or having a life-long friend, means little effort and work goes into that relationship. Whether you realize it or not, meaningful relationships require continual attention. "Strong Friendships" are important in our lives, and they are especially important in marriages and intimate relationships. However, keeping a friendship going is a marriage – or with another family member – can sometimes be more difficult and take more time and attention than with a friend. Here are some suggestions:

**Share everyday happenings with each other** – When you talk to a friend in person, on the phone, or through an e-mail message, you may share and listen to each other about the small details of what's happening in your individual lives and how you are feeling about it. The same thing needs to happen in a marriage and with other family members who are close to you. Couples who have lived together for many years may think they know everything there is to know about the other person. However, we are constantly growing and changing, and our reactions to what is happening around us change, too.

Unless that is continually shared, a spouse may have no idea a change in the other partner has occurred. Young couples who have an active and growing family can run

into the same problem, thinking they don't have time to share and spend time with their partner. That can be dangerous to a marriage as they may find themselves growing apart and not turning to each other when challenges arise. Having a deep friendship helps us turn toward – rather than away from – a special person during both good and bad times. That is important for long and enduring relationships.

**Listen attentively** – Sometimes, people have to consciously practice how to communicate with another person with whom they want to build or maintain a good relationship. Listening is often more difficult than talking. What are some ways to truly listen to another person who is speaking? Focus on that person by:

- a) Maintaining eye contact in a manner that is culturally appropriate for you;
- b) Leaning forward;
- c) Making non-verbal gesture like nodding your head;
- d) Giving simple and positive responses;
- e) **Not** interrupting even when you disagree or have something to share;
- f) Showing positive expressions, such as reaching out and gently touching the other person on the arm in a non-invasive, comfortable and supportive way.

The second part of listening is making sure you understand the message correctly. Simply say to the other person, "Now, let me tell you what I heard you saying, .... Am I correct?" If not, the speaker can repeat the message with different words until the listener has correctly understood the message and the feelings attached to the message. This is not easy to do if you disagree with the messages you heard. It takes patience and determination to hold your opinion until you reverse roles and have the opportunity to be heard.

**Show fondness and admiration** – It is sometimes much easier to criticize and find fault, rather than recognizing positive qualities about the special people in your life, especially family members. John Gottman, from the University of Washington, has studied couples for many years to find out what makes marriages work or end in divorce. He found that expressing fondness, encouragement, and admiration toward each other – often in small and unexpected ways – goes a long way in maintaining strong marital relationships. To use this idea with other important people in your life, it may be as simple as thanking your adult daughter for stopping by to see you or giving her an unexpected hug. Gottman says good relationships are maintained when there are five positive interactions for every one negative interaction, a **5:1 ratio**."

Developing and maintaining a long-lasting relationship indeed takes hard work, perseverance, and common sense. Having those types of relationships in our lives makes each day worthwhile and adds to our quality of life. For more tips on enhancing relationships, contact me at the Geary County Extension office (785)238-4161 or access the full publication by Dr. Shoup Olson under the Home and Family tab on our website: <http://www.geary.ksu.edu>. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!