



## How to Stay Connected as a Couple Through the Holidays

Kristen Manieri // November 19, 2018

When my kids were younger, one of our favorite summer activities was to have leaf races in the rushing streams near our North Carolina summer rental. We'd strategically drop our leaves in the wider section of the stream, where the water drifted sluggishly, and excitedly watch

them pick up pace as the brook bed narrowed and our leaf boats rushed through a collection of rocks.

This is what November and December feel like to me, like time itself is rushing and racing at an ever-quickenening rate until WOOSH—the New Year arrives.

We no sooner get the Halloween decorations packed away when the sudden onslaught of party invitations, recitals, end of year meetings, travel plans, family get-togethers, decorating to-dos, gift lists, and holiday cards crashes in like a tidal wave.

The holidays are simultaneously thrilling and dizzying, filled with both joy and total overwhelm.

Lost in a sea of turkey stuffing and stocking stuffers, one critical aspect of my life is swiftly curbed: my connection with my husband, Marc. The person that emerges when I am disconnected with myself and my partner is edgy, stressed, resentful, and exhausted.

In my relentless crusade to provide my family with the “best holidays ever,” I misplace the parts of myself that are patient and easy, slow and kind. By January, I am spent and I've overlooked what the holidays are actually supposed to be about: connection, togetherness, gratitude, and giving.

There's another way and it starts with one magical word: no.

No to party invitations and to doing more than a single string of lights outside in our front yard. No to perfectly wrapped teacher gifts and to attempting that elaborate (and frankly, out of my depth) potluck dish.

Good enough is the new perfect. Good enough creates white space. White space is where my life actually dwells. It's the moments of just being, not accomplishing or checking things off a list, where the best parts of my marriage live.

### Block out white space

This year, I've placed giant blocks of nothing in my Google calendar, placeholders for time to just be with myself and my people. These empty blocks, anywhere from one to four hours in length, are set aside as white space—they're not waiting to be filled.

They stay deliberately empty and noncommittal. I came upon one this past weekend and it was like finding a rare treasure. Of course, I had no idea what to do with myself. Free time is not something our culture handles well. We fill every moment. And when we find ourselves in an atypical instance with nothing to do, we reach for our smartphone or look around and busy ourselves as quickly as possible. But I just sat, on my couch, in the middle the day. I closed my eyes, took some deep breaths, and felt my whole body smile. White space is glorious. This holiday season, let's all schedule some nothing time.

## **Tune into the moments**

Even when Marc and I are committed to being with other people, whether it's a family function or a party, we usually have the drive there and back to connect. Often, we miss out on the opportunity to really [turn towards](#) each other, either because one of us is on our phone or we're having a surface-level conversation.

I've realized that we can use these to and fro moments to really tune in. We can drop a layer deeper and ask better questions. Same goes for bedtime. If I'm not exhausted from a chaotic gust of activity from dawn to dusk, I can find a few quiet minutes before I drift off to sleep to connect with Marc. The key is having something left in my batteries for him and not expending every bit of energy I have on holiday perfectionism.

## **Slow down**

In a guided meditation I was recently listening to on Insight Timer, the speaker introduced me to the idea that we can actually feel like we can slow time by slowing our breathing, our bodies and our motions. When I'm buzzing around my house like a tornado, my life feels a little out of control, like I'm in a speeding car clutching the steering wheel with a white knuckled grip.

But when I slow down, literally exaggerate my movements like I'm pretending to be a sloth, it's as if the world begins to pace itself to me. Perspective immediately sets in. The lens pulls back. I suddenly see that I'm being a crazy person and I'm probably missing the point of the whatever I am doing. When I slow down and become less frantic, I can see that I actually do need a hand and I can invite Marc into the kitchen to work with me. I speak more kindly to everyone instead of harshly barking orders to Marc and the kids like a drill sergeant. I let go of getting it all done. I get less prickly and thus easier to connect with.

## **It's an inside job**

Staying connected with Marc, I've recently realized, is an inside job. If you'd asked me last year how a couple can stay connected through the holidays, I would have suggested they schedule more date nights or make sure they meet on the couch twice a week to catch up. But now I realize it's really about making myself more available and accessible in our day-to-day life instead of running myself ragged and becoming boorish and bitchy. By taking better care of myself, slowing down, tuning in, and getting grounded, the best version of myself emerges.

If the holidays become a tireless and harried flurry of getting stuff done, Marc is quickly (and brusquely) relegated to my sous chef and errand boy. But when I slow down and put things into perspective, I remember who he really is to me: my partner and the person I always dreamed of creating holiday memories with. Look, none of the holiday trappings mean anything if I've attained them by force and fury. Having a joyful, connected holiday season is absolutely possible. But if it is to be, it's up to me.

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