



THE GIFT OF PRESENCE

by Will Marré

We absolutely, positively know that intimate, trusting relationships are the single greatest cause of personal happiness. Love is far more satisfying than money, ambition, houses, cars, even vacations. With love, there is no loneliness. Without love there is no happiness. We all know that. So why don't we practice it?

Mostly we are too busy.

Many people I coach complain about their chronic lack of work/life balance. That was Carl. He has a very demanding job with an endless stream

of email, conference calls and meetings. When I met him he was juggling lots of competing priorities, and was in a violent storm of demands and commitments constantly swirling in his work and family life. He was dying inside.

Carl arrived home most nights about 7 p.m. — too exhausted for real quality time with his family and always preoccupied with his work. Dinner consisted of his Blackberry by his side and the drone of the television in the background. While Carl pretended to be fully present, asking questions, issuing praise and demanding superficial obedience from his boys in a cadence that appeared engaged, the truth was he was disengaged, and his family knew it.

I have heard this story endlessly as our technology era has erased the old rhythms of work, love and play in ways that are simply destroying happiness. Humans are not naturally designed to thrive under conditions of relentless stress...so we don't. Instead, we cope.

But what we want is love.

Intimate, loving, spontaneous, enjoyable relationships require two regular investments. Time and attention. What's tough is that the whole rest of your world wants your time and attention. Your work requires it. But so does the Internet, YouTube, Facebook, 24-hour news, every advertiser, every politician. And yet we need to keep a firm grip on whom we give our attention to.

A decade of research from Columbia University shows the single most powerful way to establish life balance is to faithfully have daily dinner with loved ones.

So what happened to Carl? He did as I suggested and committed to giving his family three hours of full, engaged presence, three hours off the grid every night to invest in his most important relationships. When Carl walked in the door every night at 7 p.m., he shifted his full attention to his loved ones. He spent 30 minutes playing with his sons — wrestling, catch, Frisbee. When his family sat down to dinner, he was naturally attentive to what was being said and felt around the dinner table. After dinner, Carl helped his wife, who also worked, with dishes, laundry and homework. Basically, the next few hours were spent as a team in a rhythm of work, support and communication that builds trust, rapport and friendship.

How long do you think it was before Carl's family noticed the difference in him and his attentive presence? You guessed it. The change in his family culture was virtually instantaneous — and transformational.

So here is the key to having meaningful relationships and great evenings. It is the intentional gift of focused attention. Here are a few tips that amplify the benefits of fully engaging with our loved ones.

1. *Take five minutes after work to breathe deeply and listen to calming music.* This will help create a new inner state and put away all electronic devices.
2. *Mindfully hold your intention on your loved ones* by thinking thoughts of advocacy for their happiness.
3. *Mindfully invest yourself in seeking to understand their inner world without judgment.* We all long to be valued for our uniqueness and not criticized for our failings.
4. *Greet each loved one with loving touch.* Loving touch is nonsexual. It generates oxytocin, a brain chemical that stimulates feelings of emotional trust, safety and closeness. Keep it comfortable rather than weird, but find natural ways to physically connect.
5. *Seek to know why loved ones think what they think and feel what they feel.* Don't judge their logic, yet don't be afraid to occasionally prompt them to think in different ways.
6. *Throw yourself fully into your loved ones' activities.* Be fully present at dinner, helping with chores, homework, watching a TV show. Don't multi-task. Make every act sacred by giving it your full and fun attention. Whether it's folding laundry or taking out the trash, it isn't hard to switch to mindfulness.
7. *Create a bedtime ritual with your partner.* Watch something funny on TV, read side by side, or hold hands. Just make it your special time.

The gift of presence is love. The gift of love is happiness. We only create those gifts if we intentionally create the time to be present.



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