

); // end hide from browsers

rut-proof your relationship

Is your time together playing like a scene from *Groundhog Day*? We're about to put your hum-drum ho-hum into fast-forward

By Vicki Glembocki



Do you and your husband spend alone time talking about the frequency of your baby's spit-up? Can you and your boyfriend find at any hour, any night of the week an episode of *Law & Order* to watch? Are you having "8-Minute Missionary Every Other Tuesday After David Letterman's Opening Monologue" sex? Could be you've slipped (and fallen) into a relationship rut. And you know the old saying: The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth of the hole.

We're not stuck, you say. We're just comfortable with each other. Maybe so. "One couple's rut may be your fun evening," says Pepper Schwartz, sociology professor at the University of Washington and author of *Between Equals: How Peer Marriage Really Works*. "The question is, how does it feel?" If you're bored, if

you'd rather do housework than do each other, you've probably got some digging to do.

I don't have time, you say. I'm not creative enough. No worries, we brought the shovel. Here's how to rescue yourself from the five routines that plague us most.

Are we turning on our computers again?

There are those who spend 14 hours at the office; those who work opposite shifts and are mere ships passing in the shower; those who work all day and all night (and all weekend) cleaning, mowing, babying, and making lists of what needs to get done next week.

"The worst part of this rut is that you can actually be considered a champion for being in it, for being so dedicated," says couples coach Jim Sniechowski, who with his wife, Judith Sherven, cowrote *Be Loved For Who You Really Are*. "But you're letting your work be more important than your relationship."

Since most of us can't quit our jobs, we need to make mini dates with our partner, Sniechowski says. Start small: Meet for lunch once a week, talk for 20 solid minutes at the end of the day, eat breakfast together. Once you've got a routine, get creative.

Jon Cofsky and Abbey Mahady, dating workaholics in Haddonfield, New Jersey, have a "Priceline Party." Every few weeks they wait until 4 P.M. on a weekday and shop priceline.com for a last-minute hotel deal in nearby Philadelphia. They get to be together, they get to stay in swanky hotels for low rates, and there's only one stipulation: no laptops.

Are we going to dinner and a movie again?

Designate a date night, whether it's once a week, every 2 weeks, or every month, and just stick to it, says Mort Fertel, marriage coach and author of *Marriage Fitness*. Always get out of the house. Never invite anyone else. And most important? Never go to any form of entertainment where you have to face in the same direction and aren't supposed to talk. Shoot pool. Go bowling.

"People are always looking for some dramatic, Herculean event that's going to transform the relationship," Fertel says. "That's not necessary." While it might be impressive to schedule a dual spa treatment or head up in a hot air balloon, you'll never beat the intimacy of Fertel's favorite date: going to a coffee shop.

Are we fighting about the dishes again?

"There's nothing more harmful to a relationship than feeling like you're not gaining ground on something," Schwartz says. But we keep getting into the same sweaty ring, swearing that this time we'll throw the knockdown right hook while the crowd cheers, "You go, girl! You finally persuaded him that he needs to listen to you more, communicate his feelings, and actually get off the couch now and then!"

Most people argue by launching the same ammo, but expecting different results. That is the real problem. "You need to step back and consider, 'What does he always say before I say that? What does he do before I do that?'" advises Michelle Weiner-Davis, author of *Getting Through to the Man You Love*. Then, you need to change what you're saying or doing.

Chris and Ally Loprete in Los Angeles were stuck. Whenever she came home from work, he was watching sports. He would ask her how her day was, expecting a one-word answer. She'd launch into a 20-minute vent and, though he would try to listen, he'd glance at the TV, which turned into a huge, screaming, weekly fight. But when Ally stepped back, she realized she wasn't changing her ammo. So the next time he asked her about her day, she said, "Chris, you are a sweet man. But if you ask me about my day, I'm going to tell you about it. If you want to watch the game, just say, 'Ally, I'll talk to you at the commercial or when the game's over.' Stop trying to be the nice guy, because it's really pissing me off." Bull's-eye.

Are we watching *Law & Order* again?

"When you don't take your hand off the clicker, you're paying more attention to the TV than to your spouse," Fertel says. "Not good." He threw his TV out. And you could too. But what about *The Bachelorette*, you say. And *Desperate Housewives*. Okay. But if you don't want to become a desperate housewife, agree to watch only 5 hours of TV a week. Or try a weeklong ban. How will you fill the time? Play cards. Put a puzzle together. Talk to each other.

"The TV isn't the problem here," Sniechowski says. A lot of people don't know how to communicate, so they watch TV instead. Sniechowski suggests using the TV as a jumping off point. Watch *CSI: Miami*, *Fear Factor*, *Alias* whatever and when it's over shut off the TV and talk about the show for a few minutes, even if it's just to balk at couples who are willing to swim through raw sewage. "You'll go on tangents," Sniechowski says. "Eventually, you'll start to look forward to the conversation after the show rather than to the show itself. You might even stop watching the show all together. You won't need it anymore."

Is it Tuesday after David Letterman's opening monologue again?

"When sex is good, it's not an issue," says April Masini, relationship advice columnist and author of *Date Out of Your League*. "But when it's bad, it's huge. It's one of the key sources of divorce." First, Masini says, you need to sex up your bedroom. Get rid of the TV. Clear the nightstand of the stacks of magazines and the kids' rectal thermometers. Add aromatherapy candles (try aphrodisiac-prone jasmine or sandalwood), books of erotica (try *The Delta of Venus* by Anais Nin), and a CD player with sexy CDs (try Sarah McLachlan's "Fumbling Towards Ecstasy" or Prince's "Purple Rain").

Now what?

"Our bodies produce sex chemicals naturally. That's nature helping us hook up," says Ian Kerner, clinical sexologist and author of the best-seller *She Comes First*. "When the sex is no longer new, we need to trick the brain into stimulating those chemicals. We need novelty." But it's better to break the ice before breaking the iceberg. Tell each other about sexy dreams you've had. Have sex in a room in which you've never had sex before.

Or go to the gym. Just being in each other's presence during an everyday routine can add fuel to the flame. "Exercising together can be a great way to get the adrenaline flowing," says Logan Levkoff, Ph.D., a New York City sexologist. "You get sweaty, a little competitive, and before you know it, you're in the mood for the between-the-sheets aerobics."

Once you're feeling, well, a little looser, Kerner suggests you give yourselves a sex-toy assignment. (You each bring home a toy of your choice.) Or role play. (Remember that fantasy you had about the guy in the produce section? Act that out.)

When Jackie and Dave (not their real names) in Austin, Texas, were longing to re-create the rush of their first kiss, they initiated "Story Nights." They take turns creating personae and scenarios that lead to sex, prepping for the big night with anticipation-building e-mails hinting at how to prepare for the evening (which often involves costumes). "Every night has brought about that raw, horny-teenager sexual tension," Jackie says. "We capture that first-time feeling every time."

Photo by: Paul Costello

Appeared in the April/May 2005 issue of Women's Health

');// end hide from browsers