

Time and Couples, Part II: The Sixty-Second Pleasure Point

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It has been said that for couples and families in the 1990s, the commodity most in demand is *time* (Ventura, 1995). Whatever other issues they may be struggling with—communication, in-laws, childrearing, sex life, money, household responsibilities, and the like—most of the couples I see privately and those whose therapy I supervise mention lack of time as a major issue and frustration. Couple partners complain about lack of time to fulfill work or household responsibilities, lack of time together, lack of time apart, lack of time with extended family or friends, lack of time with their children, lack of time for sex and intimacy, and lack of time just to do nothing. My informal research on couples that I, my colleagues, and my students have seen over the past few years suggests that this perceived lack of time cuts across socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation lines, and is experienced at all stages of the couple life cycle.

Although in some cases, one or both partners may exaggerate or create extrarelationship time commitments as a means of distancing from each other, for most of the couples with whom I have worked in therapy, their time constraints—often centering around work, homemaking, and child-rearing demands—are real. These time pressures often seem so overwhelming and unchangeable to the couple that they preclude more time for the relationship, particularly for the types of pleasurable activities that are believed to be central to maintaining commitment (Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg, 1994). Time constraints may directly affect therapy as well, in that, no matter how motivated they are, couples may experience such time pressures that they believe they have little or no time to try to institute any of the changes that emerge from the therapy.

They may fail to follow through with interventions in which the therapist suggests even what seems to be a minor addition of fun time—an

evening off ("we can't get a baby-sitter"), a weekend away ("we don't have money for that"), or even dinner together ("our rhythms are off—she's home three hours before me, and can't wait to eat").

In an earlier chapter of this book (Time and Couples, Part I: The Decompression Chamber), I presented an outline of a theory on the relationship between couple distress and functioning, and the dimension of time (described in detail in Fraenkel, 1994). This theory forms the conceptual background of the work described in the present chapter as well. Here, I will describe an intervention I use with couples who genuinely want to increase their sense of closeness, but who have become immobilized by their seemingly immutable, unyielding time constraints. I will also discuss how, when it does not lead to increased closeness, this intervention can be useful to begin a dialogue about issues that may be blocking one or both partners' desire to spend more time together.

FINDING TIME FOR FUN AND CONNECTION: THE "SIXTY-SECOND PLEASURE POINT"

The Sixty-Second Pleasure Point challenges the notion, often held by busy couples who have all but given up trying to spend time together, that they need large amounts of time in order to restore, build, and sustain a sense of daily intimacy. The intervention is designed to create a sense of connectedness with a minimal investment of time. Although it is not a substitute for the benefits of larger amounts of time together, the Sixty-Second Pleasure Point can serve as a first step for couples who have found it difficult to locate any time for conjoint pleasurable activities. Doing the Pleasure Point exercise often generates a renewed sense of hopefulness about the relationship, and stimulates the partners to be more creative in how they find time for each other. Some couples may then build the exercise into their daily routines, whereas others may use it to provide a sense of connection during exceptionally busy periods.

To initiate the Sixty-Second Pleasure Point intervention, I first assess what the couple has tried already in terms of building in more fun time. When it seems it has been truly difficult for them to make time, I then ask them to do a free-flowing brainstorm in response to the following question: "Think of all the fun and pleasurable things you could do with one another *in sixty seconds or less*. Include in the list things you could do when together and those you could do with each other when physically apart (by using the phone, e-mail, fax)." Couples typically smile at this question, and then readily list ideas. Some examples I have heard in my practice and in couple workshops I run include:

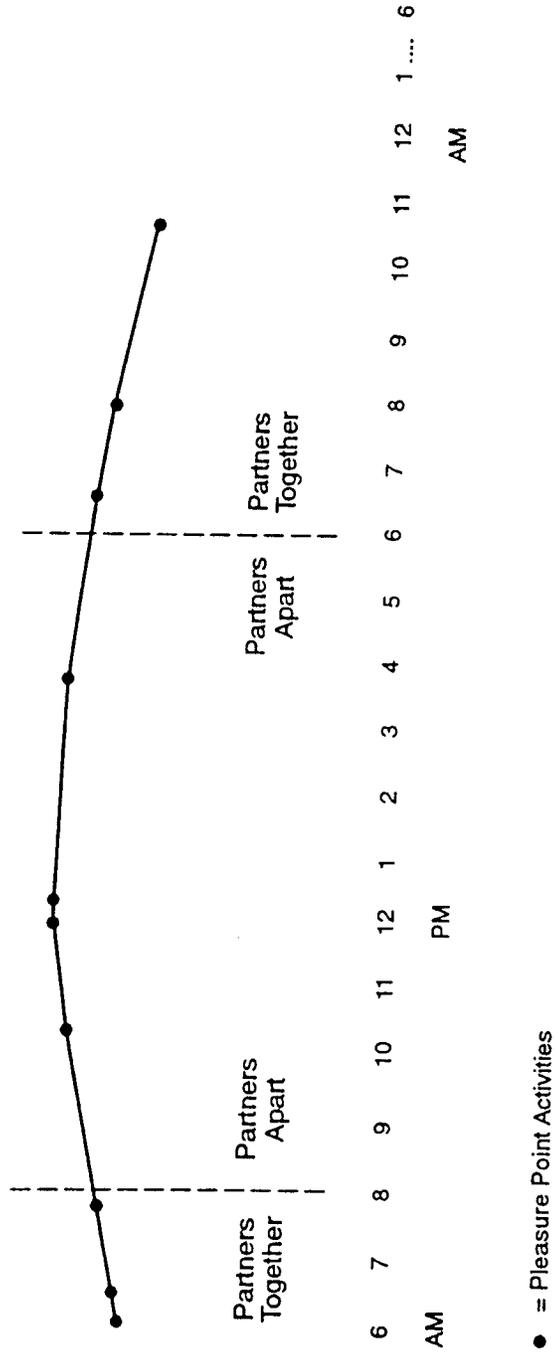
Read a poem or something interesting from the newspaper, give a neck/back/foot/hand massage, kiss, hold each other, stroke one another with feathers, share an apple, tell (or send by fax or e-mail) a joke, brush each other's hair, listen to music, dance, have a glass of wine, feed each other something delicious, tell each other (in person or by the phone) "I love you and miss you," whisper something erotic in each other's ears, light a candle together, pray, smell some perfume or a flower, watch the end of a sunset, list all the things we would like to do if we had more time.

After the brainstorm, I then ask couples to imagine doing *ten* Sixty-Second Pleasure Points with each other across the day—a few if and when they see each other in the morning before one or both leave for work, a few during the day while apart, and a few more when they come back together at the end of the day. Using a pad of paper or chalkboard, I then write a flat line and mark it by the hours of the clock, beginning at 6 a.m., placing a line for each hour in sequence, and ending at 6 a.m. If working with a group of couples in a workshop, I then give an example of how a couple might distribute the ten Pleasure Points across the day; if working with a couple privately, I will ask them to place their planned Pleasure Points across the day.

Next, I ask the partners if they remember ever doing some kind of connect-the-dots activity as child, and ask them how it felt. Almost invariably, tapping this referent experience appears to bring to both partners a further sense of familiarity and comfort about trying this idea. I then suggest that human beings seem to have a cognitive need to connect dots, find contours, put things together. This assumption is based on a large body of thinking and research in perceptual and cognitive psychology, including the early contributions of the Gestalt psychologists (see Köhler, 1969, for review), as well as the theories of Gregory Bateson (1972). Next, I draw (or have the couple draw) a line connecting their Pleasure Points (see Figure 32.1), and I suggest that by doing these ten Sixty-Second Pleasure Points on a daily basis, they *may* find, although it is an imperfect solution to their time-pressured lives, that they will experience an "arc of pleasure and connection" across the day.

Couples generally will attempt to carry out this activity between sessions—after all, it requires them only to dedicate ten minutes of time per day, so it is hard for one or the other partner to say "we have no time"—and in most cases couples report that it greatly relieves each partner's concern that they could never find *any* time for each other. Often, it

FIGURE 32.1. Sixty-Second Pleasure Points Across the Day Creating an "Arc of Connection"



generates enough renewed hope and energy on the part of the partners that they spontaneously find or make even more time for each other.

CONTRAINDICATIONS

I have used the Sixty-Second Pleasure Point intervention with a wide range of couples and problems. In general, it has been quite successful in demonstrating to couples that small changes in how they use time can lead to surprisingly large outcomes of increased satisfaction, cohesion, and decreased conflict. I would not use it with couples whose level of conflict is extremely high, or whose level of commitment is extremely low. The intervention requires collaborative effort by both partners to approach the dimension of time more creatively, and assumes that both partners do want to spend more time together. Because the time required for the exercise is so minimal, failure to complete it almost always indicates an unwillingness on the part of one or both partners to carry it out, rather than an *inability* to do so because of external time demands. In such cases, exploration has generally revealed more pervasive issues for one or both partners about the degree of closeness they wish to share with each other. Thus, if carried out, the Sixty-Second Pleasure Point exercise usually increases the couple's sense of connectedness, and if not carried out, the exercise stimulates an important discussion about expectations and desires for closeness and intimacy.

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