

Need Space in Your Relationship?

Just Don't Say it That Way

Several years into her marriage, Jessica Carr discovered a receipt on her husband's desk for a late lunch at a waterfront restaurant in Seattle, 45 miles from the farm she shares with him in Orting, Wash. He had told her he'd spent that whole day in business meetings.

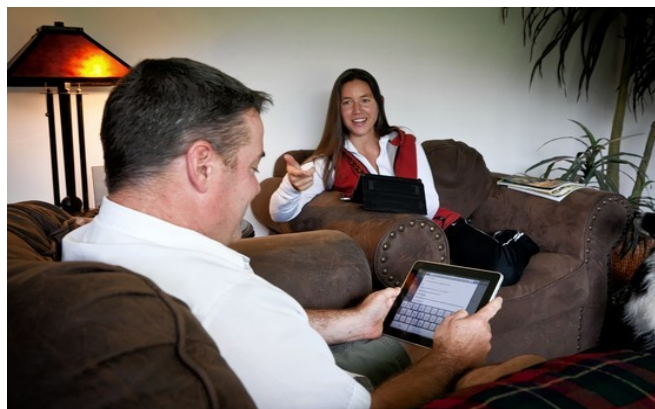
"Uh-oh," Ms. Carr, now 38, remembers thinking. She'd thought her husband had seemed emotionally distant because he was overwhelmed by raising two small children. Now, she worried something else was going on.

Ms. Carr, who owns a horse training, breeding and boarding business, confronted her husband. "What were you doing, and why did you lie to me?" she asked. She braced herself for the answer, and it surprised her: He'd just needed a little time alone.

"It seemed selfish to take the time for myself, but sometimes I need to unplug," says Rich Carr, 49, owner of an interactive marketing company.

I love asking happy long-time married couples to tell me the secrets to their successful union. Over and over, I hear this answer: "We give each other space."

Having enough space, or privacy, in a relationship is even more important to a couple's happiness than a good sex life, according to a recent unpublished analysis of data from an ongoing federally funded longitudinal study. And women tend to be more unhappy with the amount of space in their marriage



Schedule time alone together.

than men.

Terri Orbuch, a psychologist and research professor at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, has been studying 373 married couples for the past 25 years. When she asked participants if they felt they had enough "privacy or time for self" in their relationship, 29% said no.

Dr. Orbuch recently analyzed one year of data from her study and found more wives than husbands (31% versus 26%) reported not having enough space. She believes this is because women often have less time to

themselves than men. Even when women have jobs outside the home, they still are typically the primary caregivers of children or aging parents. And because they also tend to have more friends than men, they often have more social obligations.

Dr. Orbuch asked participants if they were unhappy in their marriages. Of those who reported being unhappy, 11.5% said the reason was lack of privacy or time for self. That is a more common answer than the 6% who said they were unhappy with their sex lives.

"When individuals have their own friends, their own set of interests, when they are able to define themselves not by their spouse or relationship, that makes them happier and less bored," says Dr. Orbuch, author of the book "Five Simple Steps to Take Your Marriage From Good to Great." Space gives people time to process thoughts, pursue hobbies and relax without responsibilities to others. And the time apart gives partners something new to talk about. "Space brings excitement and novelty," Dr. Orbuch says.

A person's need for space is a function of innate personality, and of their "attachment style," which is determined in infancy largely by the way we are parented, experts say.

People who had affectionate, nurturing parents are comfortable with both being close to others and being alone; they have a "secure" attachment style.

Those whose parents were inconsistently available to them emotionally often have an "anxious" attachment style. They crave closeness, fear abandonment—and need and want less space. Those whose parents were rejecting often have an "avoidant" attachment style, resisting closeness and seeking space because they fear they will be hurt.

People who fear closeness tend to seek out people who are warm and inviting. This is how someone who needs a lot of space ends up with a partner who hates to be alone.

Couples can work out their space issues, if they understand each other's different needs and why. "Underneath, both individuals want love," says Vondie Lozano, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Glendora, Calif. The space-seeking partner's need may be greater because he probably has fewer social connections, Dr. Lozano says. "When the couple can see he is just afraid of being hurt and she is just afraid of being abandoned, and it all goes back to their families," then they can stop taking it personally, she says.

Individuals who don't get the space they need will find a way to create distance, Dr. Lozano cautions. They may lash out or withdraw. "If you don't give them their physical space, they will take emotional space," she says.

Mr. Carr grew up in an Air Force family, moved around a lot and often lived on farms. He says this upbringing made him self-sufficient. He experienced periods of isolation after each move, because it would take time to make new friends. He learned to entertain himself by riding horses and hiking in the woods.

Ms. Carr says she would like less space because she spends a lot of time alone in her work day, doing chores and riding.

Earlier in the marriage, Mr. Carr sometimes would schedule a meeting in Seattle and spend an afternoon walking around Pike Place Market. "That meeting with business representatives took half an hour, and my meeting with myself took two," he says. He often took back-to-back business trips.

At home, he often snapped at his kids, grunted at his wife or sat there, scowling. "I needed to get some stuff out of my head," he says. Ms. Carr tried not to take her husband's grumpiness and distraction personally, but it was hard. "I started to pull back because I thought he wasn't happy with me," she says.

Around this time, the Carrs overheard a couple, whom they didn't know, arguing. Each presented his or her view, then calmly discussed it. At one point, the husband noted they were late for an appointment and suggested they talk again the next day. "I saw that and thought, 'We need to schedule time to talk, to visit and discuss what we each need to get done,'" Ms. Carr says.

Now, the Carrs have marriage meetings. At 5:30 each morning, espressos in hand, they sit for an hour by a wall of windows overlooking Mount Rainier, catching up on personal stuff. Then they call up their joint calendar online and discuss the day's schedule—including the personal time each one will need. "What works is making this a part of a normal conversation," Mr. Carr says.

After the meeting, he goes for a walk of a half-hour or more with his Labrador retriever. Some afternoons, he sits in an old chair overlooking the pasture in back of the main stable. For a "major reset," he schedules a stay at a business retreat center in Austin, Texas. This year and last, he spent three days alone at a rented cabin in the woods, Father's Day gifts from his wife and kids. "When I give him his space to do what he wants," Ms. Carr says, "he is more engaged, more excited and more rejuvenated when he comes home."

Room of One's Own

Here's how to negotiate for more space without hurting your partner.

- ***Be specific. Say, 'I need the afternoon to myself.' Simply saying 'I need space' sends confusing signals.***
- ***Explain why more space makes you happy, so***

your partner knows it's not about him or her.

- ***Enjoy the space you take. Guilt defeats the purpose, says Barbara F. Okun, counseling psychology professor at Northeastern University.***
- ***No secrets. Tell your spouse what you did and with whom when you were away.***
- ***Don't get carried away. Too much space weakens your connection.***
- ***Don't forget to schedule couple time and family time, too.***

Article by:

Elizabeth Bernstein for The Wall Street Journal, 06.18.2012

Provided by:

Carole Kirby, lmsw

734.424.2797 ✉ www.therapy4couples.com
