



LAWYERS IN LOVE

I write this article as a couples counselor who also practices law. In the context of that dual career, I have been afforded an intimate view into the love lives of many legal professionals. This view – and my own personal experience in the game of life – lead me to conclude that lawyers often have a personality style that makes communication in a committed relationship uniquely challenging.

First the good news. By definition, lawyers have exceptional verbal communication skills and the ability to negotiate. The values of justice and fair play have been ingrained in us. It goes without saying that these are extremely valuable tools when dealing with any other human being, let alone the one you are most vulnerable with and love most. And having experienced a high level of accomplishment in the worlds of education and career, it is no surprise that lawyers are likely to strive for excellence in their committed relationships and unlikely to accept mediocrity.

Now the bad news. From my perspective, lawyers unconsciously assume that the qualities that have served them well in school and the workplace (intellect, logic, persuasion, competitiveness, commanding presence, charm, etc.) are all they need to succeed in the world of romance and relationships. Untrue. In fact, a diverse set of skills is required, most of which have nothing to do with what it takes to be a successful lawyer. In this article I will suggest a few ways in which you – an actual or aspiring “lawyer in love” – can experience love and avoid the heartbreak.

MAKE THE RELATIONSHIP A PRIORITY

Whether by nature of the work or by nature of the personality type, I find that most lawyers tend to be workaholics. Without passing judgment on that lifestyle choice, I will simply say that if you choose to work long hours over a long period of time, be prepared to sooner or later suffer the consequences

in your relationship or marriage. That’s a fact of life. You may be thinking that, by putting in crazy hours, you are actually making a major personal sacrifice for the long-term financial health of the relationship. Don’t delude yourself. By the time you have achieved your financial goal, you may very well wake up to find that the person sleeping next to you is a virtual stranger (if they are still there). I urge you to take the time to honestly assess what your relationship or marriage is worth to you and whether you are giving your partner or spouse the precious time he or she deserves.

The practice of law requires a high level of mental engagement. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to disengage mentally from the subject of the day’s focus. Thus, we tend to continue to think about the cases we are working on long after the workday is done. It doesn’t necessarily occur to us that this preoccupation could cause fallout in our home life. But it does. Unbeknownst to us, our partner (rightly or wrongly) begins to feel more and more uncared for, invisible, and unappreciated. Working at home on a regular basis is yet a higher order of potential strife. For the sake of the relationship, be clear with your boundaries: the office is for work; the home is for relaxation, love, and family. It may be that the “realities of life” necessitate your occasionally working long hours. During those times, you still need to set aside at least part of the evening to give your undivided attention to your loved one.

LEARN TO LISTEN

Lawyers by nature love to give their opinion and advice on just about anything. As most of us have learned by now, such input is not always well-received at home, especially if it is unsolicited. Usually, a partner or spouse is interested in sharing feelings or ideas – as opposed to asking for direction. Develop the ability to differentiate between when your loved one is looking for advice (which is actually rare) and when he or she is looking for af-

fection, reassurance, or just interest (which is almost always the case). Unfortunately, your partner is rarely going to spell it out for you. Fair or not, in the game of love, you're expected to figure it out for yourself. As a lawyer, it may be too much to expect that you're not going to chime in at some point with your two cents, but I urge you to resist the temptation and instead become a good listener.

DON'T DEBATE

It is natural for a lawyer to debate a point of contention, defend one's position, and attempt to disprove the other's line of reasoning. This communication style does not translate well from the courtroom to the bedroom. One of the principal signs of a successful relationship is the couple's ability to communicate in harmony as an indivisible unit – the very antithesis of competitive and argumentative communication. If you habitually try to prove yourself “right,” you will first anger and then alienate your partner right out of the relationship. In a healthy relationship, your spouse or partner is looking for love, respect, and togetherness in communication, not an intellectual debate (at least not solely). You can never go wrong if you always think, speak, and act in terms of “we and our” instead of “me and mine.” In relationship communication, we “win” only when the communication results in greater emotional closeness.

EXPAND YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Interpersonal communication, particularly in an intimate relationship, takes place on many levels, verbal being only one of them. Lawyers often depend on the spoken word as their sole means of communication and nonverbal skills either atrophy or never fully develop – leaving a limited ability to express thoughts and feelings. For the relationship to grow and deepen, both members of a couple need to be willing to expand their communication repertoire. One approach is to spend a day or two together without communicating in words – and see what an amazing experience it can be.

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