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JYou've finally found the man of your dreams. You've been wined, dined and have fallen in love. The sun is always shining; love songs populate your playlists and your heart flutters every time he walks into the room. Ahh, the sweet bliss of a new relationship—if only the newness lasted forever.

"In the beginning you look at the positives in your partner and for ways to connect," says Lily McNair, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and provost at Wagner College in New York. "You're less likely to think, notice and make a big deal about potential problems. As people stay together longer, that often fades. People don't realize those things you do in the beginning are the things you need to do throughout a relationship to keep the spark going." Excitement comes easy in the beginning, but once the honeymoon phase has fizzled it takes work and effort to maintain a great relationship. Try these power moves to help yours thrive.

by **teresa sanabria robertson**

1. do something good daily

"Be thoughtful and considerate," McNair says. "Do and say positive things, just like you did when you were trying to connect with that person. You'll be amazed at how good that feels."

Scott Haltzman, M.D., author of *The Secrets of Happily Married Women: How to Get More Out of Your Relationship by Doing Less*, agrees. "The key to having a happy

marriage is to, above all, get to know your spouse ... Do more of what brings your partner joy; and do less of what irritates your partner."

2 create a plan

Planning is an essential part of our everyday lives. We have business plans, financial plans, workout plans and even dinner plans. Taking the time to map out a plan for your relationship will ensure you and your partner are on the same path. "Create a vision for where you want your relationship to go," says Ronnie Tyler, co-founder of BlackandMarriedwithKids.com with her husband of six years, Lamar Tyler. "It should be complete with measures that keep you accountable."

3 reach out and touch

"Research shows if you touch each other physically—holding hands, kissing, that kind of touch—it helps people feel connected," McNair says. As we get busy, we often don't take time like we used to early in our relationship to show affection. Remember to give each other hello kisses, slip your hand in his or hug, just because.

4 consider counseling

Often people shun counseling as a last resort. "Couples should act proactively and view counseling as a positive intervention instead of an indication that we're really in trouble," says Anthony Granberry, a counselor at the Atlanta Counseling Group LLC. According to Granberry, professional counseling has become more acceptable among African Americans, yet there remains a sense a couple should be able to work through their issues. Nothing could be further from the truth. Kristy Christopher-Holloway, founder, director and therapist of New Vision Counseling Center, LLC, in Atlanta, agrees, "Counseling can help couples dis-

cover who they are in the relationship. It can assist with improving communication and learning how to support your partner."

5 take care of you

"In order for you to be a good partner in a relationship, you've got to take care of yourself," McNair says. Maintaining your health, along with pursuing your personal goals, allows you to bring more to your partnership. Nurturing your individuality, outside interests and friendships provides balance. "It's unrealistic to think your partner is going to fulfill all of your needs in this world," McNair says.

"Even though you're a couple, you are also an individual," Christopher-Holloway says. "Having healthy time away from each other can reignite sparks."

6 manage money talks

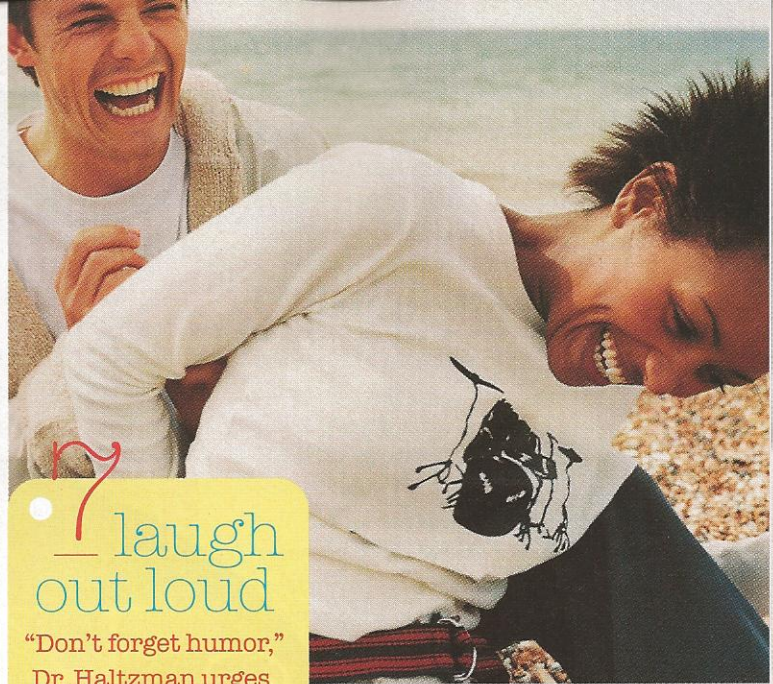
Bobette and Chris Boone, married 14 years, say discussing finances is one of the biggest challenges in their relationship. They're not alone. The couple, from Freeport, New York, consciously makes the effort to communicate regularly about money. "We talk every day about everything, including money," Bobette says, "whether it's good, bad or indifferent." Staying transparent and truthful with your partner about finances is critical to maintaining a healthy relationship.

8 plan a "play" date

"Exercising together adds a positive element to a relationship," Granberry says. Try sports or games you both enjoy and be open to experimenting with something different. He suggests golf, dominoes, basketball, tennis and jogging.

9 make time for sex

Stress—work, school, kids, aging parents—can sidetrack your sex life. "Emotional and physical inti-



7 laugh out loud

"Don't forget humor," Dr. Hartzman urges.

"Humor alone, from a wife, has the ability to shift a man from being unhappy in marriage to being quite content."

Enjoying a funny movie together, reminiscing about the past or simply finding humor in the moment can add life to your relationship.

Laughter is a powerful tool and should be enjoyed often.

macy can be critically important to feeling close to your partner," McNair says. It's important to make your sex life a priority. Don't be afraid to plan it.

"Spontaneous sex is great and planning sex is great, too," McNair says. "Trying new things with each other is also great, as long as both partners agree on what they're doing so no one feels coerced into doing something that makes them uncomfortable."

10 read, recharge and retreat

The Tylers are intentional about making their marriage

work. "We read books, attend conferences and marriage ministries," Ronnie says.

McNair applauds their efforts. "Marriage retreats are excellent because they allow you to focus on working on your marriage with other couples. Couples can benefit from talking with other couples and sharing and supporting each other. You learn what you're going through, other couples have gone through and how they've dealt with it."

11 fight fair

Arguments happen; how you handle them can affect every aspect of your relationship. "It's very important to keep communication open, even if it means you might disagree," McNair says. "People don't always know how to disagree with each other in a way that's productive."

Healthy fighting is OK, Christopher-Holloway says. "If it isn't an opportune time to talk, set a time to talk later. Ignoring a problem doesn't make it go away. Many times, arguments are 30 percent of what's happening now and 70 percent of a past issue in the relationship left unresolved." ♥

Lorraine Sanabria Robertson is an Atlanta freelancer.