



Why 6 P.M. Is the Most Important Time of the Day

When you've been apart since morning, reconnecting again is key, so it's worth thinking about the signals you're sending.

by **DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, Ph.D.**

SAM AND RHONDA, a couple in their 30s, came to me for therapy because they felt disconnected. They were busy raising two active boys, ages 3 and 5, and temporarily taking care of his ailing father while Sam was going through a

career change. Halfway into our first session, Rhonda gave me a clue to their problem. "The minute Sam walks in the door at the end of the day, I start complaining in my head—I can't stop myself!" Looking pained, Sam chimed

in: "I can tell she's not that happy to see me, so I get on the computer and try to stay out of her way."

In family life, no moment is fraught with more peril and promise than the end-of-the-day reunion. Rhonda and Sam didn't know when the distance between them had started to grow or how to remedy it, but they instinctively homed in on how they felt at 6 P.M. Couples in therapy are often embarrassed by how "trivial" their issues seem ("I can't believe we're spending money to talk about loading the dishwasher!"), and how they greet each other at the end of the day falls into this category. However, "reentry" is a crucial touchstone for couples—and research has shown that partners who can soothe each other in simple ways are more satisfied with their relationship.

In our 24/7, brightly lit, digitally connected world, it can be hard to stay in touch with the fact that we all thrive on daily rhythms. For most of human history, family life was oriented around these rhythms—day and night, planting and harvesting—and we developed rituals to mark them. When it comes to our kids, we intuitively grasp the need for rituals and routines. We put a lot of time and effort into helping them with transitions, easing them from wakefulness to sleep with baths, songs, and bedtime stories, and creating fun routines to get them ready for school.

We tend to forget this basic human need when it comes to our partners, but we should also help each other with transitions. In fact, there's a deep physiological basis for this. People who live together co-regulate each other's nervous system, and getting in sync through physical and emotional contact can make the rest of your life feel better. Here are some simple steps you can take to feel closer and more content at the end of the day.

➔ **Figure out how to start off on the right foot.**

It's natural for both partners to crave comfort, support, and appreciation after a long day. It's also normal to want a break and a little time to yourself.

However, people aren't always aware of how badly they need these things, or how subconsciously worried they are about not getting them. But when both partners feel their basic needs aren't being met, evenings go downhill.

A bit of advance discussion and problem solving can work wonders. Choose a calm moment to share your thoughts about what's working and what's not. Maybe you'll decide to start the evening "clock" after the parent coming home from a grueling commute has had 15 minutes to shower and change. Maybe a stay-at-home parent can take a quick breather by handing the baby off right when a working parent walks through the door. A who-does-what schedule for each evening of the week can also help to clarify your expectations so that friction doesn't build. Things won't always go according to plan, but making an agreement can be a powerful way to set a better tone.

→ Greet each other.

Find your partner—whether it's at the front door or the kids' bath—and make eye contact and physical contact. Hug until you feel yourselves relax, or give each other a real kiss. Say something caring, like "It's good to see you," or "There's Daddy/Mommy!" You should do this even if you're in the midst of a disagreement. It's always easier to repair misunderstandings when the channel of warmth is open. If you can't muster a warm welcome, you can at least acknowledge its absence with a short private comment: "I'm sorry I seem like I'm in a bad mood, but I'm still feeling frustrated about our texts today. Let's talk about it later, okay?" The most distressed couples don't make any effort to greet each other, and not

greeting each other makes their problems worse.

→ Resist the urge to check out.

We all need "alone time" and relaxation, but if you find yourself consistently disengaging by checking social media, watching TV, or drinking, ask yourself why. Maybe you're confused about how to address the tensions in your relationship, or there isn't enough time



and privacy to have a real conversation with your kids running around. Sometimes we check out to blunt pain, but we end up feeling lousy anyway, which leads us to check out even more.

If this sounds like you, try taking a three-day break from your usual habits, and consciously relate to your partner instead. When it's needed, let yourselves retreat briefly behind closed doors to deal with any disagreements. Research shows that children are very sensitive to strain between their parents and relieved when parents try to resolve their conflicts. Even if kids don't witness the resolution itself, they feel relaxed and "back to normal" when the vibe at home changes for the better.

→ Consider the big picture.

As parents, our goal is to launch our children into the world feeling loved, strong, and capable, with inner resources and family support. As couples, we want to create a nest for our children and each other, where everyone feels cared for and understood. Each evening you spend together as a family is like a bead on a necklace. One day, when your kids leave home, the necklace will be complete.

Rituals remind us of the cycle of life but also the passage of time. When you greet each other wholeheartedly, it restores you and helps you to remember that you're both on the same side.

My brief therapy with Rhonda and Sam focused almost entirely on their reentry time. After they got into the habit of embracing each other first thing, it instantly improved their attitude and helped them take a step back to consider the broader context. Rhonda realized that she had critical thoughts about Sam when she felt unappreciated.

Once he understood this, he tried to express more appreciation, which made Rhonda less critical and made him less inclined to check out.

In the emotional life of a couple, the minor stuff matters. Reflect on your own hour of reunion and what you'd like to do differently. You may find, as Sam and Rhonda did, that subtle changes can lead to happy results. 🌟



Daphne de Marneffe, Ph.D., is a psychologist in the San Francisco Bay Area and the author of *The Rough Patch: Marriage and the Art of Living Together*. Follow her on Twitter @DaphneDeMarneffe.