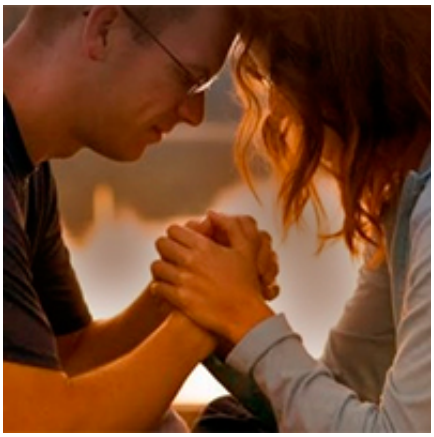

It’s easy to fall into the trap of taking each other for granted or just putting up with each other. One husband described this bluntly: “When I get home my dog is the only one who seems excited to see me!” Make this year a break-through year in your relationship by trying three powerful empathy skills to deepen your love for each other.

(1) Make your partner feel welcome in your heart.
Focus on those qualities and strengths that you honor and respect in your partner. This simple focus will restore your partner’s value in your heart. Joe, a successful physician, and Sylvia, a marketing executive, complained about their unfulfilling marriage and stressful lives. The more they talked, the clearer it became that they were living parallel lives.
Their first challenge was to switch the focus away from themselves and onto each other. They acknowledged that they were taking each other for granted and that their jobs got the best of them. They ended up giving each other the leftovers.
They decided to switch their priorities and focus first on each other’s feelings and needs and to practice daily the art of welcoming each other into their hearts.
Today they are far more emotionally connected and happier.
Try this: Each day greet your partner with a genuine smile and some expression of affection.

(**2) Become interested in how your spouse is feeling.**
Remember when you were dating? You had an insatiable interest in each other’s feelings and what would make each other happy. Over the years you may have shifted focus away from your partner and more towards yourself. Perhaps now you’ve come to expect that he or she should always be there to support you or you’ve gotten too task-oriented, hoping he or she will not interfere with your plans.

When you disregard your partner’s feelings as unimportant, however, you are actually disregarding your partner. Understanding your partner’s feelings opens the door into his or her intimate emotional life and finding out what makes your partner happy is crucial. You don’t have to be that insightful or sensitive to notice what makes your partner angry, sad, or worried–but what may be more elusive is what makes your partner happy.

Mary and Robert had been married for seven years. She complained that Robert liked to run the household as if it were his office. He was caring and responsible but always placed tasks before people. He was convinced that he was a good husband because he worked very hard to provide for his family and had never cheated on his wife or done anything immoral or illegal. He couldn't understand why Mary was unhappy with him. After all, he thought, wasn't he hardworking, loyal, honest, and responsible? Mary eventually confronted him: "Yes, Robert, you have all those qualities, but you don't give me what I want." Throughout their marriage he played the role of the good husband, according to him.

Finally he realized that he was a good husband only if Mary felt loved by him. Mary wanted a husband that focused first on loving her and the kids and then on completing tasks. He also discovered that Mary felt loved by him when he understood and valued her feelings. Try this once a week: Ask your partner what you could do during that week to bring him or her joy.

(3) Validate your partner's feelings.
Validating your partner's feelings means valuing what he or she is feeling and showing it through supportive feedback. You don't need to analyze or judge the validity of those feelings but simply appreciate that he or she shared them.
Mark and Tiffany had difficulty validating each other's feelings. Their attempts to communicate with each other usually followed a predictable pattern of failure. When Tiffany shared anger, worry, or sadness, Mark tried to help her by offering advice on how to solve or prevent the situation that caused those negative feelings.Tiffany wanted to feel understood.

Whenever Mark gave her unsolicited advice, she became upset with him. Mark, in turn, felt upset that she didn't appreciate his genuine desire to help with her problem and began to withdraw emotionally. Tiffany felt his detachment and began to resent and criticize his emotional insensitivity and shared her feelings again only with reluctance. Fortunately they broke this negative cycle by learning to validate each other's feelings. Mark began to validate Tiffany by saying, "I can see how upsetting that was for you. Is there anything that I can do to help you now?" Now their sharing leads to greater emotional intimacy.