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Deb Sandella, a psychotherapist and author of the best-seller "Goodbye, Hurt & Pain: 7 Simple Steps to Health, Love and Success," offers easy-to-follow tips for helping longtime couples keep the spark alive in their relationships. CONTRIBUTED - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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Steve Dorfman

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Making the romantic gestures on Valentine's Day, anniversaries and birthdays is easy — it's those 362 other days of the year that can present a challenge.

Especially for longtime couples.

"When we first fall in love, that feeling of constant excitement is hormonal," explained Dr. Deb Sandella, a psychotherapist and author of the best-seller "Goodbye, Hurt & Pain: 7 Simple Steps to Health, Love and Success." "But it's not sustainable. At some point — usually after anywhere from one to three years — we transition from infatuated excitement to coziness and comfort."

That transitional phase, she said, is also biochemical.

"Your body produces different hormones in the early stages of a relationship than it does after the relationship has matured."

So, how then to re-ignite those early-stage hormones?

Sandella, who's been married 37 years and has two adult children, has a few ideas.

Early in their marriage, when they were raising their son and daughter, they set aside time away from the kids in order to "remember what it was like to be a couple."

For young families, this can be especially challenging, Sandella said.



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Sandella said that, often at the outset of her annual second honeymoon, she and her husband will "have a little spat. I think of it as 'emptying out the emotional trash' — and then once we've released that stored-up tension, we're ready to rediscover each other."

Another method for couples to rediscover one another, said Sandella, is to "pretend you're on a first date with a complete stranger. And then tell your spouse all about your life, your background — how you got to this stage and what's important to you."

In communicating this way, partners find themselves listening to one another from a different perspective.

"I remember the first time that my husband and I did this because of the way he spoke about 'his' children. It made me fall in love with him all over again," said Sandella.

Another important aspect of renewing a long-term relationship is for each partner to grow individually — especially via activities that *don't* necessarily include the other person.

This helps in two ways, explained Sandella: "First, every relationship needs a balance of together and apart ... together and apart. And when that 'apart' growth — say, one partner taking a cooking class or joining a book club — is then brought back to the relationship, it adds new stimulation for *both* partners."

But what Sandella has found is most critical in determining a couple's long-term viability is their "emotional intelligence."

That is, being in touch with one's own emotions, as well as those of their partner — and having the capability to adapt to changing needs and circumstances.

"Emotional intelligence is really just a combination of empathy and compassion for another person," Sandella said. "And what successful couples find is that, when conflicts arise, agreement is *not* necessary for there to be compassion for the other person."



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