

Cage Match

“I can’t take it anymore! It’s like every little thing that has ever gotten on my nerves is just amplified. If I don’t get out of here soon, I’m gonna lose it! I feel like I’m stuck in a cage!”

Like all of us, Dawn was sick of being cooped up at home. And after so much time in the same space with only her partner, Dawn was out of patience.

As we talked (by video conference!), it became clear that Dawn had noticed the relationship irritants before, but they had been easy to overlook, or even reframe as ‘cute quirks’ of her relationship. But now that neither of them went away to work or went to hang out with friends, these little idiosyncrasies became like sandpaper rubbing over the same spot – at first distracting, but then painful, and then maddening.

In the best of circumstances, it can be hard for us to see the best in each other. But these have been very different times, and being confined together has pressurized relationships in a way that many of us are challenged to manage well.

As it was unclear when we would be freer to move about, I knew I needed to give Dawn some tools that could work NOW to help her refresh her approach to the challenge of cabin fever. We could tackle the larger issues later.

The first order of business was for Dawn and her partner to create space. They shared a small apartment, so it wasn’t practical for them to get far enough away from each other that they wouldn’t encroach somewhat on each other’s physical space.

However, Dawn could create space in her mind. We had been working together long enough that I knew Dawn loved music. She had wide-ranging musical interests, and music could reliably shift how she felt, about herself and the world around her.

While they had a general habit of limiting earbud use when they were together, I encouraged Dawn to renegotiate this during this time. I suggested that Dawn make a daily habit of listening to music for herself as a way to get away in her mind. She could listen while she did chores, made dinner, or just hung out by herself.

Secondly, I suggested another daily habit of looking for the positive. What attracted her to her partner? What did she appreciate now? How did her partner communicate that she is loved? As a writer, it helped Dawn to have concrete tasks, so I suggested she develop a nightly ritual of writing at least 5 positive aspects of her life and her relationship. They could be general or specific, past or present, but she had to be able to feel the gratitude.

Lastly, I encouraged Dawn to create time for herself and her partner to spend time together doing something they both enjoyed – a walk, a special meal, looking at pictures of their life together. If they could manage at least a brief something every day (even if it was just a snuggle before sleep), that was ideal, but she thought a twice-a-week “date” might be possible.

When we spoke next, Dawn looked less frustrated. While they both were still ready to be out of the house, being together had become more workable. She was able to incorporate all three ideas into her life and was especially excited to share that they decided to start camping in the back yard for date night. They used to camp a lot when they first met, so this was a way for them to get out of the house AND remember sweet times they used to have together. And Dawn was able to use the tent at other times to chill out by herself.

Being forced to stay at home has been hard on all of us, but it doesn't have to turn our relationships into cage matches.

So, where do you need to refresh your mindset about your relationships?