

Steve and Meg, 20 years later

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We would like to revisit the story of Steve and Meg,* which we shared with you 2 decades ago after Steve completed his training and joined a cardiothoracic surgery practice in the Midwest.¹ When we first met them, they were embarking on their first vacation as a couple since their children were born. The past 2 decades have witnessed the unfolding of their life against the backdrop of his career in cardiothoracic surgery.

Steve has grown increasingly competent as a cardiothoracic surgeon. As his reputation has grown, he has become successful and busy, and he has contributed to creating a secure life for his family. Meg has completed a PhD, is teaching at a local university, and has recently been elected to the school board in their community. Their children have grown and are both starting lives of their own. Although the years have been wonderful in many ways, the demands of Steve's career, Meg's commitment to her own professional development, and their relentless responsibilities in raising a family have had a cost. Their once-romantic relationship has slowly slipped into disconnection and routine. They have been so caught up in the everyday that they have lost the ability to appreciate and savor every day.

Steve's practice has expanded, adding 2 new partners. Both trained at the nearby university and have brought energy and new ideas. Steve has spent a lot of time mentoring them—at times, Meg joked, he seemed to spend more time with them than with her. Both new partners were also married, and had spouses consumed with their own career development—1 as a lawyer and the other as a chef and owner of 1 of the area's new restaurants. It seemed to Steve that none of them, including himself, had time or inclination for hobbies or social life outside of the responsibilities of raising their families. They had chosen lives with inescapable and important obligations. Drifting apart seemed to



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CENTRAL MESSAGE

Relationship skills are critical to managing the demands of both personal and professional life. This article discusses skills and tools to improve your relationships at home and at work.

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be the unintended consequence of preserving the energy Steve and Meg needed to manage life's daily demands. We have previously reported on the consequences to cardiothoracic surgeons from overwhelming demands at home and at work as well as some of the resources available to them for managing these demands.²⁻⁸

During April 2023, Steve and Meg attended a national cardiothoracic surgery meeting and they heard a plenary paper presented by 1 of us (J.D.U.) about the experiences of the spouses and significant others of cardiothoracic surgeons.⁶ They remembered sitting in the audience that day and thinking how much the presentation depicted their lives. Burnout and work-related distress were contributing to some of Steve's decreased satisfaction with his professional life and his chronic detachment was overflowing into his and Meg's personal life. It was both consoling and concerning that this increasing ennui was common among cardiothoracic surgeons.² Steve remembered his excitement about entering the profession 20 years ago. He still loved what he did, but things were so different now. In the presentation, the speaker cited data that 66% of significant others and spouses of cardiothoracic surgeons felt that burnout was having a moderate-to-severe influence on the lives of their cardiothoracic surgeon partners, and this was particularly

* Steve and Meg are fictional characters but their story is based on real-life experiences shared with us by many of our colleagues. Their story is a compilation of what we have heard from many cardiothoracic surgeons and their partners, and although the specifics may be different for many (including the unique challenges faced by the increasing number of women in the field, the pressures on marriages when both couples are surgeons, and the differing resources made available by various programs to support surgeons), we hope some of the themes resonate.

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true for those spouses or significant others whose surgeon partners worked longer hours (68.4 vs 60.4 hours per week).⁶ Sixty-three percent of spouses and significant others felt that their cardiothoracic surgeon partner's schedule did not leave enough time for family life. Steve looked at Meg. Guilty!

The effect on the lives of cardiothoracic surgeons is predictable. Compared with early in their relationships, spouses and significant others of cardiothoracic surgeons found that their partners had less empathy (42%), were less connected to loved ones (48%), had less interest in social activities (54%), and were less connected to outside interests and hobbies (57%). In this same study, spouses and significant others reported that they rarely had calm, good-natured interactions with their surgeon partner (23%); they rarely engaged in activities together (40%); they didn't spend a healthy amount of time together (48%); and most disturbingly, they couldn't find time for intimacy (52%).

Steve realized that he was one of those in the group who worked the most, who had lost interest in hobbies and in most social activities, and although he and Meg seemed to have mostly calm interactions, they had clearly drifted apart and they didn't find much time (or desire) for intimacy or romance. This was hardly the type of relationship that they hoped for when they embarked on their life journey together and he remembered the time he left Meg for 3 days in a bungalow in the Caribbean on what was their first vacation together after his training—a vacation that was meant to be a romantic reconnection—and that was now a memory, often brought up by Meg, about how he was sometimes more married to his work than to her. Her 3 days on the island, although relaxing, were lonely because she had looked forward to being with Steve. Back then, she eagerly anticipated Steve's return. Now, she felt guilty when imagining how she might enjoy being back in that bungalow for a few days without him because it was often lonelier being around him than away from him. They left the session quietly, lost in their own thoughts, holding hands as they walked out of the convention hall.

"Meg, I'm so sorry. I've become 1 of those absent and disengaged partners. I want us to be more connected. Can we give it another chance?" Without knowing the language, Steve was making a genuine repair attempt—a critical ingredient for sustaining strong relationships.⁹

Meg wasn't sure what to say. She worried that as soon as they returned home it would be back to business as usual. Yet, how could she say no? How could they do things differently? They decided to sign up for a retreat on relationship skills for couples specifically designed for cardiothoracic surgeons and their partners. They learned that there were many things they could do to learn and grow as partners, including reading, seeing a trained counselor or coach, or even taking 1 of the many online courses targeting specific

skills.¹⁰⁻¹⁵ As they now reflect on what they learned, even in a 2-day event, it was transformative.

They learned a lot of science about relationships and cultivated a language that enabled them to better communicate around what they were experiencing.^{4,16-19} They were still friends. That was important. More than anything else, partners who value their friendship find a way to manage disagreements and differences (this is also true at work).⁹ He remembered that even though they both felt a bit dismayed by the data in the AATS session, they did leave holding hands (which they learned was a bid for connection and accepting each other's hand was a way of turning toward—as opposed to away [not holding hands] or against [rebuffing an offered hand]—each other).^{17,20-26} They were still committed to each other and to their relationship. Commitment to the relationship has been found to be among the most important factors in determining whether a relationship can survive the changing and inexorable demands of life.²⁷ They shared similar dreams and values. When partners have incompatible dreams, it is difficult for relationships to survive.^{17,28}

Yes, they had their conflicts and disagreements. They learned that 70% of conflicts between couples are unresolvable—often related to deep-seated patterns they learned growing up^{23,25,26,29,30}—but they could learn ways to talk to each other from a perspective of vulnerability and genuine caring, solving the moment if not the problem.^{21,31-33}

They learned to think of themselves as verbs, not nouns.³⁴ Verbs have an action to them that permits changing, growing, developing. Nouns are static—labels that keep someone stuck and puts them in a box and defines them as an entity that will never change.³⁵ They acquired some skills for learning more about each other, creating continuous opportunities to keep "meeting each other for the first time."²³ Setting aside some sacred time each week for a date night that didn't have to be elaborate.²³ This time together connects us to our shared, early yearning to belong and to be embraced by an available source of soothing with whom we feel seen, heard, understood, and valued, particularly when we feel stressed or hurt.³⁶ And for couples, to be that source for one another is critical for establishing and maintaining trust.²⁷ For your date night, get dressed up and have a candlelight dinner (Steve still had that special candle after all these years), go out for a walk, or sit on the back deck—the important thing is to break the pattern of just getting through the day and carve out some time to be a couple. And during that time, think about how to really listen to each other and connect around what is happening in your lives. They learned to be curious and to think of questions that expanded their appreciation for each other—questions that invited exploration for new information and understanding. Curious questions designed

to explore the verb part of each other, like: What do you see as your purpose in life and how has that changed since we met? Or, maybe a fun question like: If you could come back as any animal, what would you choose and why? How would I know it was you? So many ways to learn more about each other as we grow.³⁷

They also learned the importance of sprinkling around a lot of small appreciations—like having a saltshaker full of gratefulness.³⁸ Focusing exclusively on the negative about our partner can impede us from also seeing the positive. Make a conscious effort to see the good—especially the little things—and find frequent (in the moment) opportunities to express appreciation, fondness, and admiration (rather than criticism, judgment, and blame).^{17,39}

They learned about the enormous power of accepting influence—and that was helpful for Steve.^{4,38} As a cardiothoracic surgeon, he had succeeded by always being in control and advocating for what he wanted, often dismissing what others wanted as less important or simply wrong. He was learning to say, “Yes, let’s do that,” instead of, “No, we won’t do that.” He was learning to understand the perspectives of another so that they felt seen, heard, understood, and valued rather than to interrogate, judge, and fix them for being wrong.⁷ In his relationship with Meg, his habit nature (of not being curious about another perspective and not accepting influence) had the consequence of robbing Meg of her voice and after a while she simply stopped trying—except that her voice was still there, locked inside her, feeling lonely, unheard, and unvalued.²¹ It took a lot of practice, compassion, and understanding for Steve and Meg to learn how to talk to each other from a place of vulnerability as opposed to criticism, blame, and defensiveness.²¹ As they grew more comfortable with their own vulnerabilities, they began to grow closer and more intimate. It was quite magical and empowering.

They learned more than it is possible to recapture in this brief article, but the best part is that they are committed to continual learning. After all, it took Steve decades to learn cardiothoracic surgery and he was still learning that. Meg was still learning how to be an effective educator. So why not go on a learning journey for the most important job of all—being a good partner, friend, and, at work, colleague. The skills are learnable if you have the courage to struggle, sometimes fail, and keep your sense of humor as you accept, forgive, and have compassion for yourself and others and make peace with your imperfections.⁴⁰⁻⁴³

FURTHER READING

For more information, please feel free to contact us at jamiungerleider@icloud.com, ross@integratedlifefskills.com, ungerlei@mac.com or visit our website www.integratedlifefskills.com, resources and media designed to be helpful tools for learning.

Conflict of Interest Statement

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