

# Relationship resolutions

Relationship therapist James Earl sets out his New Year's resolutions for couples.



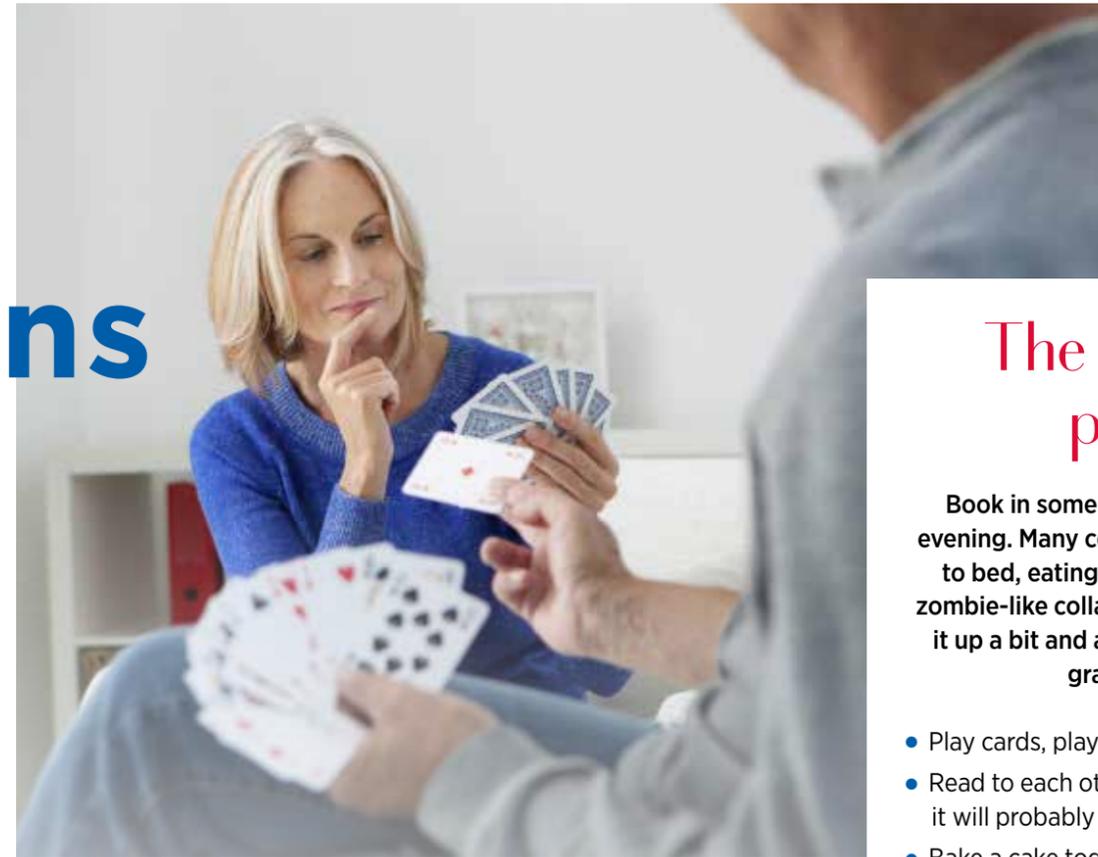
New Year's resolutions are normally focused on making ourselves a better person. But here are some thoughts on how to make resolutions with your partner, and make your *couple* better.

Sometimes we slip on personal resolutions: but, working with your partner, hopefully you can help each other stick to the plan.

Let's start by remembering the fundamentals. Firstly, we should look for opportunities for fun. Playfulness is what brings two people together in the first place – a desire to chat, have a laugh and, of course, the sexual side of things. It is helpful to see sex as just another form of fun, because it reminds us that the best way into a sex is that feeling of playful connection. Without that, sex can feel alienating and awkward.

Secondly, there is the caring relationship, where you show pride in your partner, encourage them and comfort them – the quasi-parental functions. This can be summed up in that American phrase, 'I've got you, babe.' It means you're their person, and they're yours.

You should actively demonstrate both the playful and caring side of yourself, despite the inevitable stresses of everyday life. But it is always helpful to make specific commitments, and here are three suggestions.



## The 20-minute playtime

Book in some playtime twice a week in the evening. Many couples go from putting the kids to bed, eating and clearing up, straight to a zombie-like collapse in front of the TV. So shake it up a bit and agree that on two nights you'll grab 20 minutes to...

- Play cards, play chess or play a board game.
- Read to each other (hint: try children's poetry, it will probably make you laugh).
- Bake a cake together (note: big advantage, you'll end up with a cake).
- Play each other alternate pieces of music (how about 'My favourite song when I was 17'?).
- Dance round the living room as if no one was watching (because no one is!).

Come up with your own ideas, but do book it in. Booking a connection night makes it more likely it'll happen, and incidentally gives you permission on other nights to do your own thing or the zombie thing, without guilt.



## The four-second hug

Most couples find that it's not only sex and passion that can diminish under the pressure of everyday life, but affectionate non-sexual touch too. So why not agree you'll each offer your partner a four-second hug once a day? This is a fully-clothed, standing-up, non-sexual hug that you can do in front of the kids. (By the way, as a side benefit, it's reassuring for them to see you doing this). Four seconds is important – any less seems peremptory, but any more can be interpreted as neediness or a request for sex. Feel free to count, but in your head. And offer the hug, don't ask for one – it's a gift.

The time out of your day will be 12 seconds – two to offer the hug verbally, and four for the hug itself – once each way. For a ridiculously minimal time investment, we can dramatically 'warm the context' of the relationship.

## The 20-minute catch-up

The overwhelming complaint in most relationships is that 'I don't feel heard'. So put aside 20 minutes for this listening exercise (yes, book it in.). There are two questions: one about the relationship and one about yourself.

Ask your partner: 'How do you think we've been this week?' The person asking maintains complete silence, and demonstrates attentive listening with no non-verbal signs of irritation. You don't need to agree with your partner's perceptions, but you can listen to them.

The person answering can speak for as long as they like. When giving your report, there's no sugar coating and no point scoring. Try to not to blame your partner for your feelings. So you can say, 'I got angry when you broke my cup.' But it is not OK to say, 'You made me angry when you broke my cup.'

When you've finished, ask your partner the same question back.

The second question: 'What do you need?' goes both ways too. Observe the complete silence rule throughout and let your partner speak for as long as they want.

When giving your answer, you can go from the mundane ('I need the door handle to be fixed'), to the more general ('I need more conversation/money/sex'), to the abstract ('I need a sense of direction in life'). Note, you are giving your partner an overall picture of where you're at – NOT giving them a to-do list.

When you're listening, don't try to 'fix' your partner – it's not what they want. Fixing their problem can feel like you're trying to shut them down.

Afterwards, go your separate ways for a while and don't rejoin the conversation. The magic is in the listening.

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