Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: When we think of a healthy relationship, words like commitment, honesty, respect and trust come to mind. Keeping a romantic relationship strong takes a lot of time, effort and patience. As Valentine's Day approaches, it's a good time to evaluate the state of our relationship with our partner to see what's working well and what can be done to make it better. I'm Emily Yeap.

Emily Yeap: Dr. Alicia Walker is an assistant professor of sociology at Missouri State University. One of her research areas is intimate relationships. She joins me today to talk about the traits of healthy relationships, as well as how to keep your relationship fresh and exciting.

Alicia Walker: There's lots of research on healthy relationships, successful relationships, and things that they have in common are common sense. You want to have folks who are communicating with each other. You want to have healthy, open, honest communication and that's harder than it seems like it would be, but then when you think about trying to communicate with your partner about something that's maybe a little sensitive or a little tough or you need to give them some constructive feedback, for example, sometimes that can be really challenging for folks, but it's absolutely worth it to put the work in to create that kind of dynamic because what the research tells us is when we don't do that, then over time, that really erodes the quality of our relationships. Folks who can have fun with each other and share their hopes and fears, how you fight is really important to happy relationships. We want to do that constructively. Those things are the things that we see that come up over and over and over again.

Emily Yeap: When a couple struggles with dealing with conflict, they should consider getting outside help.

Alicia Walker: It's something that really is worth the time to work on. Maybe even bring in a professional to help you. Folks kind of get frustrated and think, "Well, why would I need to have counseling for this? We should just be able to get along magically, easily." But that's not the reality. If we think about it, most of us have never had instruction on how to fight or how to handle conflict. Most of us haven't had direct instruction on how to handle our own emotions. And so you get into some sort of disagreement with your partner and emotions are running really high and you're really passionate about whatever it is you're talking about, it can be even more difficult to try to fight in a way that's constructive, especially if you haven't had good models. So what we know from the research is that, folks who can calmly and respectfully talk about whatever the conflict is, are going to fare better over time. And sometimes you are going to need some help with that.

Alicia Walker: If you're rolling your eyes when your partner is talking, that's a super red flag, very detrimental to the relationship, and you don't want to name call, you want to stick to exactly what you're arguing about, which is kind of difficult for us to do. We don't necessarily address things as they come up and we hold on to them and then something else happens and then we want to show like, "This is this pattern." Well, it may be a pattern, but you can't hold that all in and address that at once, you want to try to address things as they come up. Do it calmly, do it respectfully.

Emily Yeap: When it comes to relationships, there are lessons heterosexual couples can learn from same-sex couples.

Alicia Walker: What the research tells us is that we can learn a lot from LGBT relationships, which generally speaking, across the research, tend to be happier and folks report being much more satisfied in a relationship. And what we've learned is that a lot of that has to do with gender equity, so just creating the relationship that you want rather than creating our relationship based on gender expectations in society.

Emily Yeap: What kinds of things can couples do to keep the spark alive?

Alicia Walker: Showing consideration to your partner. Try and do small things to ease their day. It doesn't have to be buying big, expensive things or grand gestures, just those daily, consistent showings of consideration actually go a really long way. If you get up before your partner and they like coffee and you start the coffee for them, it could be something as small as that. We find, through the data, that folks that flirt with each other throughout the day do a better job with keeping that spark alive. Even just a text message, "Hey, you looked great when you left the house this morning," or "I can't wait to see you when I get home." That actually goes a really, really long way.

 Trying something new together is big. You're both learning something together, cooking class or dancing class or hiking or picking up some new something together is important because you're still growing together as a couple. But also growing as an individual. Sometimes we want to pour all of our free time and attention into a relationship, which in theory sounds really good, but you have to feed yourself as an individual so you have something to bring back to the relationship.

Emily Yeap: That was Dr. Alicia Walker, assistant professor of sociology at MSU. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

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