

# How not to take each other for granted

As Heidi Scrimgeour hammered out a text to her husband, she realised how far they had come from the loving communication of the earlier days. And then she set out to fix it...

**A**fter nearly 20 years of marriage, I'm in the favourite-pair-of-jeans stage of long-term love. My relationship with my husband feels like a second skin. It has morphed into something so familiar that it sometimes feels like an extension of me, rather than an entity in its own right which requires careful nurture.

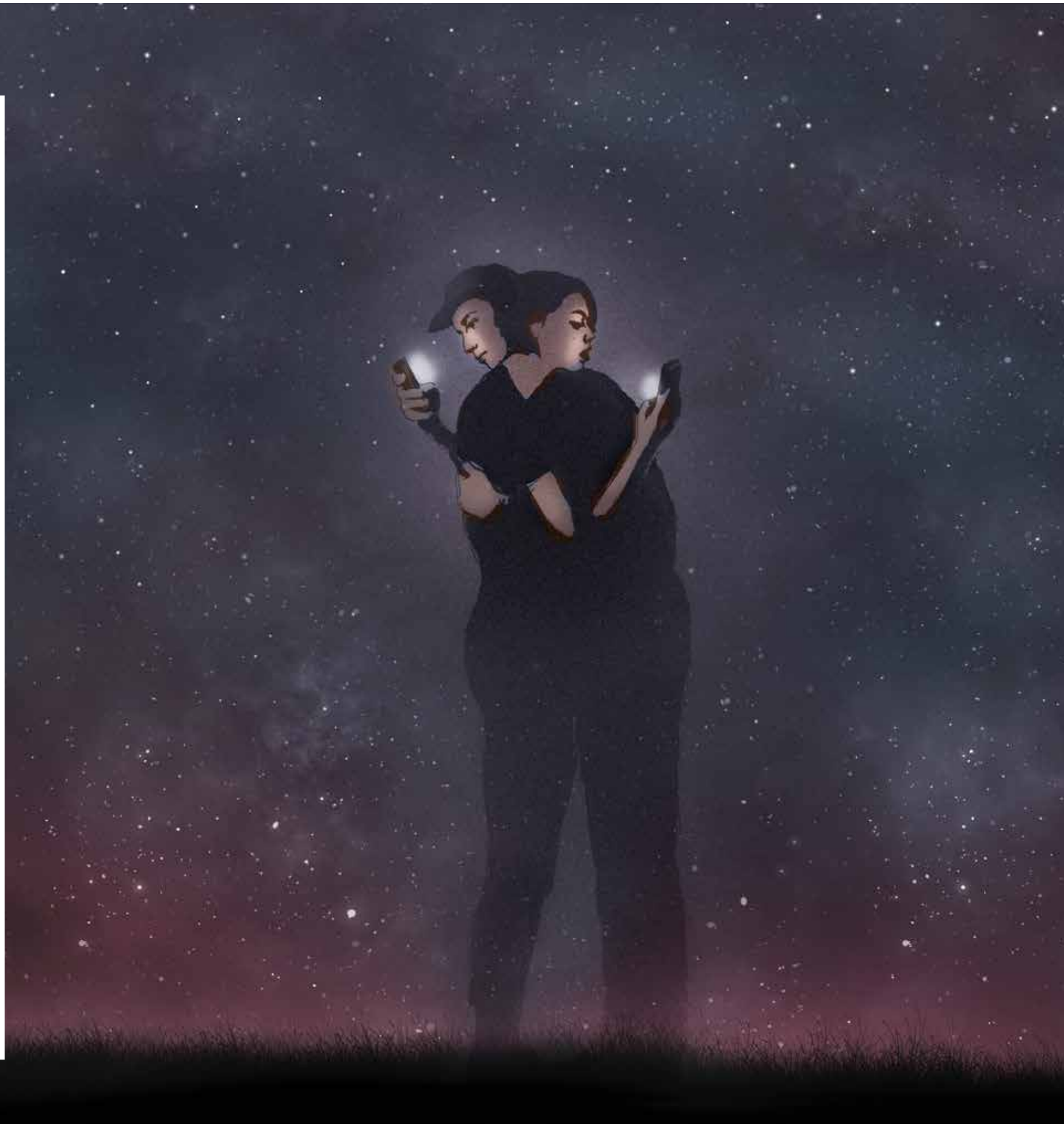
And while there's something so nourishing about being in an in-it-for-the-long-haul relationship that's as forgiving as your favourite jeans, I sometimes miss the old days of our relationship – the stage that was more akin to wearing a statement dress that threatens to cut off your circulation, but which makes you feel like a million dollars.

I'm grateful for the familiarity of long-term love, which feels secure and safe – surely the ultimate relationship goal – but I miss the part before we started taking one another for granted. What prompted this train of thought

was a text I dashed off to my husband the other day that read: 'ETA?' Those three aggressive little letters – sent to establish how long before I could hand over the kids and tackle my mounting deadlines – had usurped the three words that used to punctuate our interactions.

When we first got married, we used to call each other several times a day just to say hello, but almost 20 years later, we only phone in emergencies and our texts read like a list of time-pressed negotiations: 'Your turn for nursery pick-up today', 'Please get milk on your way home' and 'We're out of cat food'.

Our face-to-face communication has changed, too: it revolves around hasty exchanges of children and car keys instead of stolen kisses. The spark hasn't gone; it's just that the pressures of long-term life together have rendered communication perfunctory, instead of passionate. With demanding careers and three kids, we have more responsibilities than ever competing for our attention. Dr Cheryl Rezek is >>>



>>> a consultant clinical psychologist and author of several books, including *Life Happens: Waking Up To Yourself And Your Life In A Mindful Way* (Leachcroft, £16.99). She points out that there is a plus side to all of this: a sense of predictability underpins feelings of security and trust. But while there is something 'very reassuring about being sufficiently comfortable to show who we are without fear of criticism or harm', Rezek says the danger is that this breeds overfamiliarity within a couple, which can become a slippery slope into laziness, boredom or resentment.

### Think before you text

Psychotherapist Hilda Burke says that what's going on in our relationship between our abrupt texts determines how much of a problem they really pose. 'That kind of text is fine if there's a lot of love in the relationship – you probably wouldn't object to receiving it if you felt cherished by the sender,' she explains. 'But if there's tension or a lack of trust, then it could be completely incendiary.'

Our relationship is unquestionably loving, but my heart sank at the word 'cherished'. You can't cherish something at the same time as taking it for granted. That 'ETA' text must have made my husband feel far from cherished.

If I'm honest, even as I sent that text, I felt guilty. I knew there was repressed anger behind it – I wouldn't dream of communicating with my friends like this. When I'm feeling overwhelmed – which is often, on account of running two freelance businesses and looking after three kids – my knee-jerk reaction is to feel resentful towards my husband.

It's unfair, but in those moments I feel an irrational sense of jealousy that he can go to work without thinking about what time the children need to be collected or what to cook for dinner, while I'm juggling more responsibilities than I can handle and squeezing my career into the margins of his working life.

I know that pausing to recognise the



pressure I feel and asking for my husband's help, instead of mindlessly lashing out, would help me move beyond those unpleasant feelings. But we don't always act as we know we should.

No 20-year relationship is entirely sunshine and roses, of course. Underlying tensions are a normal part of long-term love, but I want to overcome them, not let them set the tone of our future communication. I suspect that once you lose the capacity to speak to your partner with kindness, you are already on a course to losing so much more. That's not a path I want to take.

We take each other for granted in other ways, too. I feel it keenly when we're in the kitchen amid the chaos of a family mealtime. We make so little eye contact in these moments, crashing into each other as we load the dishwasher

while corralling our kids to eat up and get started on their homework. He'll reach for his phone and scroll distractedly through emails when I'm trying to fill him in on the minutiae of my day, or I'll retreat to my office the moment he gets home, making no time for the connection that has been the glue that's held us together all this time.

### 'I see you' moments

It stings when I think back to the days when we couldn't pass each other in the kitchen without exchanging impromptu expressions of affection. And companionable silence on the sofa is lovely after a long day, but when did we start sitting at separate ends instead of entangling ourselves together? Are these tiny alterations in our habits the careless steps that end with couples

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separating after 40 years because the path back to one another becomes too overgrown with neglect to be worthy of rediscovery?

I know of couples who lost sight of each other in the epicentre of early family life, only to find nothing left to sustain them once their children finally flew the nest. What a careless waste to invest our lives in our kids so heavily that we end up losing the love that was the first-flame of our family adventure.

Rezek says that a key to keeping a relationship engaging, even as the dynamics change over time, is to learn to see the old as something new. 'The Buddhist concept of beginner's mind can help prevent boredom and unhealthy predictability setting in – it means seeing each experience with a sense of newness, as though it were happening for the first time. This can sound tedious or even trite, but the idea is to approach our lives, relationships and experiences – including sex and intimacy – with a feeling of open engagement.'

I decided to apply this approach to communication with my husband. The next time I needed to contact him about childcare arrangements, instead of texting, I picked up my phone and left a voicemail and, as well as telling him what was needed, I told him how much I appreciated him doing it. He responded with a thoughtful text.

This shift impacted face-to-face

communication, too. In the kitchen as we prepared dinner together over the din of family life, I paused to tell him that I appreciate him. 'Why?' he asked, and as our eyes met and I verbalised my reasons, an even deeper sense of thankfulness bubbled into life.

### The language of laughter

Humour is often the first casualty when a couple stops communicating honestly; I've witnessed this with friends whose relationships have broken down. They stopped making each other laugh long before they stopped loving each other. My husband's ability to make me laugh was one of the first things about him that I fell in love with, but there's not much scope for comedy when you're exchanging disgruntled texts that mask simmering resentments. In contrast, it's hard to stay resentful towards someone who can still crack you up after two decades together.

Simply being nicer to my husband makes me feel happier, which feeds the whole relationship. I go to bed feeling thankful instead of tense, and the reassurance that he likes hearing from me in the day buoys something up in me.

This is what Rezek means when she says reminding ourselves of what we have feeds us and nourishes the relationship. 'We forget how lucky we are

to have each moment, but we can shift our perspective. You can go from feeling bored and resentful or dissatisfied and flat, to viewing your partner and life with gratitude and compassion.'

I haven't sent an ETA text since, but instead have paused to think more carefully about the impact of our exchanges. I still text 'Please bring milk', but I make sure to add kisses or an anecdote about my day that might make him laugh. Why not try to brighten up each other's day instead of add to one another's burdens? I've realised that making time to express love, respect and appreciation is infinitely more important than any seconds I might save by typing merely 'ETA?'

'We all have time for these things, because they come from our hearts, not from a clock, and the more we develop them within ourselves the more spontaneous they become,' adds Rezek.

It's unrealistic to think we'll be Snapchatting sonnets to each other any time soon given how hectic our lives are, but pausing to reconsider the impact of these little snatched moments of communication on our relationship has reminded me that my husband deserves my best – even when I'm checking what time he'll be home. After all, that text is about so much more.

## How to reinvigorate your text life

Cheryl Rezek on making mobile connections matter in your relationship

- Kindness and respect only take a moment to express. We can always find time, no matter how busy we are.
- We often forget how powerful our words or actions can be. Choose how you wish to be in the relationship on a daily basis – whether that's kind, spiteful, dismissive or responsive?
- Be grateful. Gratitude allows us to hold onto the good when things feel awful, dark,
- chaotic or hopeless. Reminding ourselves each day of what we have to be grateful for fuels kindness.
- For relationship advice and more, see [lifelifehappens.com](http://lifelifehappens.com) and [hildaburke.co.uk](http://hildaburke.co.uk).