



EPISODE 1028

4 Mind-Blowing Ways to Strengthen Your Relationship (All Backed by Science!)

With Shawn Stevenson

SHAWN STEVENSON: My wife and I just celebrated our 19-year wedding anniversary and 22 years together, and it got me thinking about the science going on behind the scenes on why we still like each other. Why do we keep wanting to do this? Why do we have such a healthy and thriving relationship? Because as you know, relationships can be incredibly complex, dysfunctional, but they can also be powerful, and loving, and supportive, and add to our longevity in ways that nothing else can.

And so I put together four mind-blowing, science-backed ways to strengthen your relationship. And I dug around in our relationship to find out some of these things that we were doing, often unconsciously, that many other successful couples are doing as well. And I think that these are going to be incredibly helpful, but they're also going to be fascinating.

Number one to kick things off is based on an intriguing study that was titled Let's Stay Home and Watch TV: The Benefits of Shared Media Use for Close Relationships that was published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. The study found that couples who share media consumption, like watching specific shows together, had higher levels of closeness, relationship satisfaction, and commitment.

And this was seen, and this is very important, this was seen especially among couples who didn't share many mutual friends. So number one on our list is to experience imaginary worlds together. Now, there's a reason why we bond over movies and television shows. According to scientists, it's because when we watch a show or movie with someone that we're close to, it helps to build something called a shared identity.

When you're building a relationship with someone, having shared experiences and shared social connections enhances the quality and strength of the relationship. Amazingly, shared experiences of relationships with characters on television deepen that bond as well. Whether it's a shared love or hope for a character, or a shared, "I can't stand them" for a character, it helps to deepen that shared identity as you're experiencing it together.

Let's take having a favorite show that you watch together, and it tends to go through these stages. At first, we both love this show Then it evolves to Wednesday night is our night to

watch this show. And eventually it becomes, don't watch that show without me. By engaging in this experience over time, couples accumulate an entire ecosystem of shared references, routines, language, inside jokes, memories, characters whose lives that you build together and understand within your minds and as your shared identity, opinions, expectations, all of these things start to accumulate again, creating an ecosystem that you share together.

It becomes a part of us. This realization hit different for me when I thought about the fact that we have so much shared language from movies that we watched together 20 years ago. In the beginning of our relationship, there is still a frequent part of the culture in our relationship, in our household.

For example, something that we say on a regular basis, for whatever reason, we find inappropriate ways to say this, but it was from a movie called Billy Madison, one of Adam Sandler's first movies. And there's a scene in the movie because Adam Sandler is just a kid who just won't grow up, where his father is telling him, hey, I've got some big news.

And there's a villain who works for his father, the villain of the story, Eric. And Billy Madison played by Adam Sandler. His dad says, I've got big news. And Billy says, and goes over to Eric, goes right to his belly. Oh, Eric must be pregnant. It's going to be a soccer player. He's rubbing his belly. I can feel the kicks.

He's going to be a soccer player. Yes, he is. Yes, he is. And so in our relationship, frequently we'll say, "He's gonna be a soccer player." All kinds of different situations, different contexts. I don't know why, but it just stuck. It's a shared memory, and we go right back to that moment, watching that movie at my apartment in Ferguson, Missouri, no matter where we are in the world.

And the same thing with Happy Gilmore. We had an Adam Sandler era that I introduced her to. It was a big part of my growing up, so I introduced her. I put on a Game, Happy Gilmore. "It's all in the hips. It's all in the hips." You know, this hockey player turning to golf. And there are so many more examples like this in our relationship.

You know, one of the early things that we did was watch the Lord of the Rings movies together, and we've brought language from watching those films into our relationship that, again, is still part of our lives on a regular basis. You know, especially Smeagol, you know, AKA Gollum, is a big part of our relationship.

We'll say this on a regular basis, "Gives it to us, my pre-" She doesn't say it like me, of course, which would be mad creepy, but, you know, "Gives it to us, my precious, my preciouses." We'll just sh- say, "My precious," here and there, and it's a part of our relationship. So this is something that we experience oftentimes, but we don't realize what's going on behind the scenes, and it's all rooted in our shared identity.

Now, there's another study that I want you to know about, and this was cited in the journal Personal Relationships, and it was titled "The Role of Shared TV Watching in Couples' Daily Shared Reality." The researchers examined the construct of this shared reality and pointing to it's essentially the feeling that we're not merely experiencing the same thing.

We're experiencing it in a similar way, and this is very important when examining this phenomenon. Two people can sit beside each other watching the same television and have two completely separate psychological experiences. A shared reality, on the other hand, means something more similar to you saw what I saw, you felt what I felt, you get why this is hilarious, or you get why this is tragic.

We interpret that character the same way. Now, this fits a much larger psychological literature showing that humans have a fundamental motivation to establish commonality in our inner states. Our feelings, our beliefs, our interpretations, our concerns, we're driven to share these things with other people. Now, this underlying sentiment is incredibly valuable, and this is what I want you to take away from this being number one on this list.

Intimacy isn't only knowing your partner. It's knowing the world together Now, what are some tips for us to utilize here? Well, the advice is not simply to watch TV together. It's not about that, per se. The bigger takeaway is much more powerful. Strong relationships don't just share a home, they gradually create a world that belongs to the two of you.

And so this could be a television series, novels, trips, hobbies, rituals, running jokes, favorite restaurants, games, playlists. The list goes on and on. But these can all become another little piece of us, you know? Your relationship, what builds and creates the phenomenon of us. So the questions to utilize here are, what are those shared worlds for you and your partner?

What are those things? Are they certain hobbies? Are they certain shows that you watch together, or novels that you might read together? Again, this can be a whole host of things. So what are those things for you right now, and what are some things that you might aspire to collect? So this can be, maybe make a list of shows or movies that you wanna watch together.

I have a list that I created, like some family movie lists, and also lists for just the two of us. Maybe it's a list of novels that you would love to read together. Make that list. Maybe it's a list of restaurants that you want to visit together. And this actually leads us to number two on this list of four mind-blowing, science-backed ways to strengthen your relationship.

Number two is to eat together on a regular basis. A wonderful study titled Two Forks, One Meal: Health Implications of Shared Food Systems in Couples was just published in the journal Appetite this year. The study included 12,686 participants with data available from 5,276 romantic couples. The researchers specifically measured how frequently people ate meals with their romantic partners.

This is juicy stuff. The researchers discovered that more frequent shared meals were associated with higher relationship satisfaction, higher life satisfaction, fewer depressive symptoms, better overall subjective health, and greater similarities between partners' eating habits. Naturally, you're going to influence one another.

The researchers found that the average amount of times that couples were found to eat together to share meals on a regular basis was about 10 shared meals per week. Now, what I'm about to say is incredibly important. Eating together may be one of the primary ways that humans do relationship. This might be one of the, if not the top tier things that humans have

done for thousands upon thousands of years to actually create the construct of a relationship.

Now, there's a very beautiful sociological concept that's called commensality. Commensality is the practice of eating and drinking together at the same table or sharing food within a social group. Now, a study from scientists at Cornell University followed couples as they transitioned into marriage. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews around the time of marriage and again approximately a year later, and they observed something fascinating.

As people married, their spouse increasingly became their primary commensal unit. The researchers concluded that commensality was an important component of the way people do marriage. Meals might be separate with work and life, but having those frequent touch points, maybe breakfast or dinner together, becomes a ritualized behavior communicating, of all the people on Earth to eat with, you're the person I regularly turn to.

You're the person that I would want to do this with more than anybody. Now, on the other side of the equation with this phenomenon, the research is revealing that people are actually eating alone more often than ever before. A peer-reviewed study cited in Nutrition Journal in 2018 found that people who eat alone tend to have poorer diet quality and lower intake of essential nutrients than people who more frequently eat with others.

We know that there are some negative side effects attached to eating in isolation more frequently. Not to say that you can't eat by yourself, all right? But are we doing that today? Most of the time, if we're eating by ourselves, we're not sitting on a park bench watching the birds and looking at the beautiful environment.

We're generally watching in front of a screen and mindlessly throwing food down into our pipes. All right? So our eating experience has transformed into something that we've never seen before in human history, and the ramifications are not looking good. But one of the ways to counterbalance this is intentionally having that time to eat together with the people that you care about.

Do we know that it makes a positive impact? Well, yeah. I got you right here. A new study, a new study affirming the benefits have just been published this year in Scientific Reports. The title of the study is Sharing Meals is Associated With Greater Well-Being, and it used the data from 142 countries and territories around the world.

Huge data set. The researchers found that across almost every world region, sharing meals more frequently was significantly associated with greater well-being, including specifically more overall subjective happiness, less stress, less sadness, and less physical pain on the day that they shared a meal together.

Now, by the way, this new study is not just isolated and focused on couples eating together. This is a... can be a family construct as well. But I wanted you to know this information because we have mountains of it at this point affirming the benefits of eating together with the people that we care about.

But again, we have data specifically looking at couples, and it's so powerful. And the question is, are we taking advantage of this? So what are some tips here to make sure that we're getting these benefits in our lives? Well, especially today when we've got so much going on, I often say that if you don't schedule it, it's not real.

And we have so much on our schedule that if we're going band for band, bar for bar, item for item, are less valuable to us than our relationships, and yet they're on our calendar. And so giving our relationship the proper respect, the proper due, and putting it on our calendar to have that date night together, have that family meal together on specific days, but making sure that you also have those times when you can get in that, you know, that one-on-one for sure.

It's a game changer. I can look back directly at the times when the date nights were few and in between of more conflict in our relationship, and it's just like, I don't feel like it's a problem. I think everything's cool. But you just see like a, uh, like a, a fire brewing over time, and it actually got to the point where my kids would be like, "Dad, when's the last time you guys went on a date night?"

If they see that mom is being a little chippy. And I'm like, "Oh, you know what? You're right. Thank you to my accountability partners who I made." Right? And so keeping that in mind, if you don't schedule it, it's not real. I'm a big fan of putting our date nights on the calendar, and for us right now, they're bi-weekly, and then they're family specific, you know, weekends that are n- the other weeks.

So we have those bi-weekly as well, so having a little bit more intention. It doesn't always go according to plan. But it's essential, especially today, to have that one-on-one time, and I am a massive fan of making sure that that one-on-one time includes sitting down and having a meal together, and there's pr- pretty incredible ways to s- slide in some other opportunities as well.

Pun intended, damn. Um, but especially back to school time, right? This is a great opportunity. Drop the kids off. You guys go have breakfast together. Or, you know, maybe you can meet up for lunch. You know, there's so many other creative ways, but it's just making it a priority because it does pay off big dividends overall over time according to the data.

And funny enough, while we were sitting down and having our anniversary meal together that, you know, 19 years, I've scheduled what we've done 17 of those 19. So once we got to 19, and I've done a lot this past year, I was like, "Hey, please take the wheel on this one. You can s- whatever you wanna do, I'm in."

And the reason that I've scheduled the stuff, it's not that, you know, my wife is just there for the ride Pun intended. Damn. Um, but she knows that I like, I don't like surprises. I like to know what I'm doing. Uh, you know, I tend to have this more kind of routine mind. Maybe it's a little control. Okay, I'll say it.

I'll say it And so this time, "Hey, whatever you wanna do, we'll do." So she booked this incredible spa experience with a massage, sauna. It had, like, a tropical mist area, you know, had the chlorophyll water, all this really cool stuff. And then, uh, right by there was this amazing French restaurant. I'd never been to a French restaurant.

Only French I know is, like, Wimby and Gobert. That's it. That's all I know. And I had a French baguette for the first time, and I get it. I get it. It's j- it's different. It doesn't even compare. But while we were having that anniversary meal together, it sparked number three here on this list of four mind-blowing ways to strengthen your relationship, all backed by science.

And number three is to create a relationship highlight reel. After we ate and we had some extra time in between our next part of our anniversary experience, which she booked some tickets for the Hollywood Improv comedy show, all right, on top of everything, but in between that, she pulled out her phone, and she used AI, all right?

She checked in with the chat and asked, "What are some ideas?" Like, "What are some things for us to, uh, do in this 19-year celebration?" And one of the suggestions was to share, each of us individually, what our top five moments from our 19 years together would be. What are my top five moments in our marriage?

And so, wow, just starting to go down memory lane and to tag these different things. There were so many, so many. It felt so good. I was just overcome with amazing emotion and feeling and just joy and, and gratitude. And, you know, just to, to be able to share those things and to listen to what hers were, you know?

And also just to be like, you know, "Oh, I have that one too," 'cause, you know, it might be something totally different that I wasn't thinking. It was just such a cool experience. I was so grateful. And then she added on a question that she thought of herself, which I'll share some catalyst questions or prompts for you at the end of this particular section.

But I wanna share the data with you first, because little did I know, this is based on some incredible, mind-blowing science that I just really never thought about. Again, we do these things, but we don't think about the mechanisms happening behind the scenes. In a fascinating study that was published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships examined the effects of romantic nostalgia. In a series of studies that included six hundred and thirty-eight people, the scientists found that romantic nostalgia is positively associated with greater relationship commitment, satisfaction, and closeness.

There's actually a surprisingly compelling body of research around this phenomenon. Researchers sometimes call it, again, romantic nostalgia, relationship nostalgia, or the reminiscing of relationship-defining moments. The evidence suggests that remembering meaningful experiences that you share with your partner can reinforce feelings of closeness, commitment, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction.

The bottom line is that romantic nostalgia, creating these highlight reels of your relationship, have some remarkable benefits when it comes to strengthening your bond. So the bottom line is this: it isn't simply that happy couples have more happy memories. It may also work in the other direction.

Remembering the experiences that created your bond can actually help to reinforce the bond itself. So what are some tips here? Well, I wanna give a little caveat, because nostalgia itself, nostalgia is defined as sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, and so reminiscing can be, in some instances, bittersweet based on your perspective.

So this exercise is not to drive you to wish that you could, quote, "go back." It's to drive you to appreciate what you've been through together and value having that person with you along the journey right now. And so keeping that perspective in mind, here are some prompts, some questions. Again, these include the one that my wife asked me and some additional ones that I have for you.

Top five moments. Talk with your partner over, preferably over a meal together. What are the top five moments from your relationship? For us, it was, "Well, what are the top five moments from our nineteen years of marriage?" The other one that she shared with me: "What are the top three things that you love about me?"

Oh, that was so good. I had a great time telling her the ways that I love her. You know, and I was very interested to hear the things why she loved me, you know? Also, here's some other ones. What are the top three things that we've accomplished together? What are your three favorite trips that you've taken together or taken with the family?

Right? There's so many different prompts that you can utilize here, but this can help to create those relationship highlight reels, again, helping to strengthen that bond. It just really starts to... As you can see, all of these things we've covered so far, they start to feed into each other in creating this very positive feedback loop, especially when we become conscious of them.

Now, this leads us to number four and the final one of our four mind-blowing ways to strengthen your relationship, all backed by science. And number four is to exercise together. A remarkable study published in the Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness tracked the exercise habits of people who worked out with their spouse compared to people who worked out without their spouse.

Over the course of the one-year study, the researchers shockingly found that people who worked out without their spouse dropped out of their exercise plan 43% of the time, while people who worked out with their spouse dropped out only 6% of the time. In other words, people who worked out with their partner in this study were six times more likely to stick with it. That's incred- Like, where else can you get that kind of consistency?

We just oftentimes are not aware of its potential. Now, by the way, this is not to say... Because there's a ton of people who work out consistently without their partner, this is not to say that everybody working out with their partner, that it's gonna end up being successful. But based on the data that we have, it tends to be significantly more consistent when people are choosing to work out with their partner.

So again, what this study is indicating is that there might be a substantial advantage for people who find it difficult to be consistent to lean into the social support of working out with their loved one. But I wanna make a little sidebar here, because this is not merely relegated to our significant other.

Having that support and that social dynamic is incredible across the board. An incredible systematic review conducted by the US Department of Health and Human Services revealed something shocking that most people have no idea about. Based on multiple studies, the

researchers discovered that social support doesn't just help people to be more consistent with exercise.

It increases the amount of physical activity people do by almost 50%. It's like, again, there's nothing else like it, and we oftentimes just don't realize the power of having that social connection in our exercise habits. And by the way, this doesn't mean that you guys gotta hit the gym together. There's so many different ways to utilize this physical activity component in our relationships.

This could be simply walking together, and that in and of itself can be a game changer. According to a study published in the journal PLOS Medicine, walking for just 11 minutes a day is enough to extend your lifespan by two years. You get two more years together. I want them. I want every year I can be with my girl.

I want them. All right, two more years walking 11 minutes a day. Now, again, this can be an opportunity, uh, walk and talk. All right? We're getting the physical fitness in, we're getting the steps in, we're getting the insulin sensitivity, we're getting the cardiovascular benefits, getting the blood flowing, getting that lymphatic fluid moving.

We're getting the immune system inputs. We're getting the mental cognitive benefits. We're getting brain health benefits. The list goes on and on and on, all packed together with time with your significant other. And by the way, walking together is also an opportunity to improve your overall body mechanics together.

Because from our modern lifestyle, we're pretty messed up. We're pretty messed up. All right, we're just walking around kyphotic. You got the neck, the whole... But a lot of our problems start from the ground up, starting with our feet. Our modern footwear has mutated, devolved our feet into something extraordinarily strange.

And most people don't realize there's so much data that our feet are collecting that inform every bit of movement that's happening up the chain. So it can be knee issues that are rooted in foot dysfunction. It could be back issues that are actually rooted in foot dysfunction, neck issues. The list goes on and on and on

Our feet have 26 bones, 33 joints, 19 muscles, 107 ligaments, and each foot has over 200,000 nerve endings that are collecting data to determine our movement. Our modern shoes essentially mute thousands of data inputs that would normally be transmitted from our feet up our kinetic chain and determine appropriate movement.

And the results, we have epidemics of foot dysfunction, foot and ankle injuries, knee injuries, hip injuries that can be rooted back to abnormal footwear. Now, don't get me wrong. I love my variety of kicks that I have acquired over the years. All right? Especially being a kid who grew up in poverty I didn't get any Jordans until I was a grown man, all right?

And once I got them, I, I pr- I, I appreciate them, all right? Not appreciate, I appreciate them. And I have times when I wear those types of shoes, of course. But when you see me out walking, there's a high probability that I'm going to be wearing shoes that are actually designed for foot function and overall foot health.

And those shoes that I wear have a wide toe box. They're stylish, of course, and they have a science-backed five-toe functionality. And I'm talking about the incredible footwear from Peluva. And right now, when you go to peluva.com/model and use the code model at checkout, you're gonna get 10% off all of their footwear, the incredible five-toe socks as well.

And they're just really above and beyond as far as the different styles, as far as the different uses. They've got shoes that are des- designed for the golf course, for hiking, for cross-training. The list goes on and on. Really, really cool styles as well. So head over there, check them out, peluva.com/model.

That's P-E-L-U-V-A .com/model. Use the code model at checkout for 10% off. And so this is something that we'll often do together. We'll go for a walk together. I throw on my Peluvas. We can get this fitness in. Even if we're not going to the gym together, which we go to the gym together less often at this era in our lives.

There was a time, there were years, clips of years, where we were going to the gym together just because it fit our family dynamics at the time. But, you know, life evolves, things change,

but still, having that time to do some physical fitness together is incredibly valuable. And so Again, realizing what's happening behind the scenes, the science.

If you're wondering why your significant other is maybe struggling to be consistent, how involved are you in the process? Are you just, like, pointing the finger? You-- Why don't you do this? You should do this. Try... Do it together. Do it together. Find creative ways to invite them in or invite yourself in to what they're doing, and find ways to, to create more positive feelings around it as well.

So sometimes it's checking our ego and checking our mouth so that we can just be more positive and affirmative. And you never know when somebody gets bit by that fitness bug where it can take them. So we've gone through these four mind-blowing, science-backed ways to strengthen your relationship, but I've got a bonus for you.

I cannot not share this one. Now, this overarches all of this. This is the umbrella under which all of this is contained, and the bonus is to proactively, intentionally grow together. There's a sentiment that if you're not growing together, then you're growing apart. And so finding ways to invest in your growth together, your personal growth, your spiritual growth, and there are many ways to go about doing this.

This could be attending events together. This could be meditating together. This could be praying together. This could be reading books together. Maybe there's personal development books that you read together, or maybe there's novels that you read together. There's multiple layers of benefits for each of these.

But again, we-- with the novel reading, we're going back into that shared identity and the characters that you create as well. So it's just being intentional and remembering that if we're not proactively growing together it's a high probability that we're growing apart. Now, all of us can have our individual things that we're growing and evolving and, and developing and changing on in our personal aspirations, but it's very important to grow with your partner, to proactively do things together for the growth of yourselves and your relationship.

So I hope that you enjoyed this. If you did, please share your voice in the comment section below this if you're watching on YouTube or Spotify. Which one of these is something that you might have accidentally been doing that you're going to value in a different way now, or what was something that inspired you and it's now something that you're gonna go out and put into practice?

And that's what it's really all about. It's about taking action, and it's about sharing this with our partners, with our family members, with the people that we care about, because our relationships truly do impact our lives and our success, our longevity, our overall sense of wellness, and our life satisfaction, our fulfillment more than anything else.

So it's an important place for us to invest. I appreciate you so much for tuning into this episode today. We've got some epic masterclasses and world-leading experts coming your way very, very soon, so make sure to stay tuned. Take care, have an amazing day, and I'll talk with you soon.