Love by numbers

Dr Luisa Dillner
Saturday June 9, 2007

Guardian

My boyfriend and I have busy jobs and although we live together, we rarely spend any proper time together. He says it's just a phase and will pass. I don't think other couples live like this. How much time do most people spend together and does it matter?

The Office for National Statistics finds that on average we spend two to two and half hours a day together, including weekends. And what do we do when we're alone with our loved ones? Watch TV (one third of all the time spent together), eat (30 minutes) and do housework together (24 minutes). Whoopee. Married people spend half an hour more together than people who cohabit. Retired couples spend only four hours a day together. Are they avoiding each other?

By 'proper time' you presumably mean time when you interact. TV is passive unless you fight over the remote. A study from the Brigham Young University and Colorado State University tracked the leisure activity and relationship of 318 couples who were married or lived together. They found that women cared more than men about spending time together. But they were clear that the time had to involve talking to each other. If you can't remember what an activity like that would be - think visiting a place of interest (an art gallery rather than pub) or cooking together. Just being with their partner didn't make their relationship better - they had to communicate with them.

Of course it matters if you don't spend much time together or if that time is spent having a TV dinner. A study in the Journal of Sex Research of 6,029 couples from the US National Survey of Families and Households found (somewhat obviously) that the less time couples spent together, the less sex they had.

Don't just hope that things will get better. The Office for National Statistics suggests that if you don't make time for each other, you'll have a relationship, not just a phase, that's based on sleeping and TV.