



Writer Anne Bokma  
and her husband, Jeff

# Couples' Retreat

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Can a weekend away revitalize your marriage and rekindle your romance? You bet!

BY ANNE BOKMA

Craig is a 50-year-old renovator with a smirk that suggests he'd rather be anywhere else than in this room with seven other couples attending a marriage retreat. As Craig introduces himself and talks about why he's here, he gestures to his wife, Laura, and says their marriage is on the brink of collapse. This retreat is a last attempt to save it.

As part of the introductions, each person has been asked by the retreat leader to bring along a special gift from his or her partner. Craig slides back the cuff of his sleeve to reveal an expensive watch from Laura. But then he stops himself. The best gift, he says, is actually their 10-year-old daughter. At the mention of her name, Craig's wide shoulders begin to »

shake and he fights back sobs. His wife seems surprised by the tears.

My husband, Jeff, and I steal nervous glances at each other. What have we signed on for?

After 22 years of marriage, Jeff and I have decided to try to recapture a greater sense of intimacy in our relationship by attending a weekend couples' retreat in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. A friend had told me about the retreat and although I thought I might have to convince Jeff, he was surprisingly keen to go. (I think the prospect of two romantic nights in an elegant inn sans kids may have been more enticing than the actual relationship work.)

Like many couples, we are divided at times by our differences: I like to talk things out; Jeff tends to clam up.

I'm a tightly wound type A enslaved by my to-do list; he doesn't wear a watch or keep an appointment book (a quality I once found endearing) and has a decidedly laid-back approach to life.

Jeff and I focus almost all of our time and energy on our jobs, our two kids and our home. There's little time or energy left over for each other. I'm tired, he's tired – and sometimes our marriage feels tired. There was a time when we romanced each other with poetry and long conversations into the night. Now our quality couple time consists mainly of flopping on the couch with glasses of wine at the end of a long day to catch "The Daily Show."

That's why we're here at a marriage retreat, holding our breath and wondering what's in store.

Grace Cirocco, a professional speaker, relationship and life coach, and author of the bestselling *Take the Step, The Bridge Will Be There*, has led more than 200 couples through her weekend workshop, which she says is the equivalent of 12 months of traditional marriage counselling. Despite a palpable sadness in some couples in our group, I am struck by how engaging, funny and articulate they are. One participant, Sam, tells the group that he's a man who's perfectly comfortable talking about his feelings. "For example, I like bacon." We all laugh. Already I'm enjoying the camaraderie of our shared experience.

I soon discover that this feeling is one of the advantages of group marriage retreats. "You see that your problems aren't unique and that you aren't alone," says Cirocco.

Our job this weekend is to learn more about ourselves and our mates. Cirocco leads us in the first of many exercises designed to bring us closer: a minute-long heart-against-heart hug with our partners. "A good hug is food for the heart," she says. The lights are dimmed and couples move to the corners of the room. I try not to feel self-conscious as I hold »



Jeff in my arms. I can't remember the last time we embraced this long and lovingly outside the bedroom.

Cirocco sends us off that night with some guidelines: no TV, no cellphones, no email, no newspapers, no distractions. We must completely focus on each other. And for the next two days that's all we do. She leads workshops on topics that include male-female communication styles and increasing self-awareness. We write "healing" and "apology" letters to our partners. The women and men have separate brainstorming sessions to discuss what the sexes need from each other, and we write about what we love about our partners.

On Saturday night, Jeff and I are exhausted after just one day of emotional housecleaning, but happy about the progress we feel we've made. Both of us have owned up to mistakes we've made in our marriage. Instead of pointing the finger at each other's faults, *Cirocco* encouraged us to examine where we have personally come up short. We've also shared all the things we love best about each other. Jeff and I have found those lists to be satisfyingly long.

*Cirocco* suggests capping off the evening with a pillow-talk exercise: lie on the bed, face each other, make eye contact and take turns talking about something specific you love and appreciate about the other person. The words come easily for Jeff and me, and it doesn't take long before the exercise has its desired effect. But later we break the retreat rules by flipping through some TV stations; some habits die hard.

## A FRESH START

While most marriage counselling focuses on sharpening communication skills, *Cirocco* says couples who are having problems need to go deeper to make improvements. We carry old wounds

in our relationships and they affect how we treat each other. We become burdened with resentment – *Cirocco* calls it "hardened rage around the heart" – and, as a result, the same issues can keep coming up over and over with no resolution.

Symptoms of this resentment can rise to the surface in a thousand tiny cuts – the sharp tone, the sarcastic retort, the cold back in bed, nagging, ignoring, the silent treatment, shutting down. Jeff and I are guilty of some of these things too. For example, early on in our marriage we had promised never to go to bed angry, but there have been nights when one of us was snoring loudly (usually him) while the other (usually me) was still steaming at the ears because of an unresolved argument.

Before you can grow closer, you need to excavate those hardened emotions and start fresh. *Cirocco* helps couples do this through a series of exercises. One, which she calls "peeling the onion," involves sitting face to face with our partners, knees touching, eyes locked, and talking for 15 minutes without interruption about what we want from our relationships, what we are afraid of, and how we feel about any hurts we have received from our partners.

The exercise is intense, and I later realize it's the most pivotal part of the retreat for me, mostly because I've never seen Jeff go so deep to reveal his vulnerabilities before. He tells me how he feels like a child when I criticize his driving or lose patience when he forgets things – and how he recognizes that he hides in silence when there's conflict between us. I reach forward and grab his knee in encouragement. I may not like everything I hear, but it's good to hear him being so honest. I never knew how much these things bothered him and I resolve to think more carefully about my actions.

When we are asked to write in our journals about this exercise, Jeff »

writes: “I felt very much in love during this exercise. I was hearing Anne with total sympathy, even when what she had to say reflected negatively on me. It was more difficult to go into my own feelings and bring stuff up for Anne to hear. But I did it because I was challenged to, and the honesty and depth of my partner’s answers inspired me to be more honest with my own feelings.”

### SMALL STEPS, BIG CHANGES

By the last day of the retreat there’s a lightness in the room, as if a collective burden has been lifted. We are no longer a group of strangers. We share photos we had been asked to bring of ourselves at different stages of our relationships, and talk about how we feel about ourselves and our spouses in these pictures. Positive memories come flooding back for all of us, even Craig and Laura. (I’m still keeping my fingers crossed for them.)

For Jeff and me, the retreat offered the perfect opportunity to refuel a relationship that was in danger of running out of gas. We’ve developed new habits: We have breakfast out together once a week, and take time at night after the kids are in bed to check in with each other, sharing what we’re grateful for before going to sleep. (Finding time for each other is key to a successful marriage; learn nine other secrets at [canadianliving.com/april](http://canadianliving.com/april).)

More significant, there’s been a shift in attitude; an acknowledgement on both our parts to take our share of responsibility for any problems in the marriage. There’s also a new willingness to overlook those small irritants – whether it’s his dirty socks on the floor or my obsession with tidiness – that can erode contentment in married life. So now, instead of being annoyed by Jeff’s snoring, I’m trying to be thankful for the presence of a loving partner each night in bed. ■

### 4 WAYS TO REFRESH YOUR RELATIONSHIP

You can be in a long-term relationship and still have a romance that newlyweds would envy. (Yes, really!) Here, Canadian sexologist Trina Read, author of *Till Sex Do Us Part – Make Your Married Sex Irresistible* (Key Porter, 2009), offers a few tips.

- 1.** Give your relationship a checkup. Talk to your partner and find one thing you both want to change (such as having a weekly date night). Focus on it until it becomes a habit and then move on to your next goal.
- 2.** Make a list of things you find romantic (candlelit dinners, receiving an unexpected love note in the mail). Ask your partner to do the same. Exchange lists and make a pledge to listen to each other.
- 3.** Make an effort to be more playful and laugh together – in and out of the bedroom. It will keep you enjoying each other’s company.
- 4.** Studies show that couples with successful marriages schedule sex. And those who put a little nooky on their agendas really do have sex more often. — Kathryn Dorrell