

The Bargain Romantic: How to Keep Down Your Valentine's Day Costs

By Leon Scott Baxter

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Everywhere I go, every other commercial I see, someone's telling me I need to spend this Valentine's Day: If a dozen roses says, 'I love you', two dozen says more. She'll never forget you after you give her our finest diamond tennis bracelet. Chateau Fromage is offering special reservations for two this Valentine's Day.

Shouldn't the celebration of love come more from the heart and less from the pocket? Oh, okay. Who am I fooling? If you've spent a minimum of ten minutes with me, you know I'm a frugal SOB. I pinch pennies so tightly, I've got a permanent indentation of Lincoln on my thumb. Instead of buying lunch, I head over to Costco everyday at noon and woof down the samples they offer. Takes a lot of trips up and down the aisles to get my fill, but if you get a chance, try those cheese-stuffed, breaded chicken breasts. C'est magnifique.

I may be cheap, but let's get one thing straight here; I'm a staunch advocate of romance. But, being the coupon clipper, two-for-one shopper, bargain rack kind of fellow I am, I've become quite the expert at expressing my love without using my American Express.

Maybe you're young and just scraping by. Or, you've exhausted all of the old Valentine's stand-bys (flowers, candy, dinner, jewelry). Or, it could be that you like me and the yard sales and thrift stores are no longer inspiring you romantically. This year I'm offering five inexpensive (or free) ways to share Valentine's Day with your love, and still win their heart.

Use the Bathroom

Everyone's got a bathroom, right? Well, use it this Valentine's Day. What, not the most romantic room in the house? Convert it to a mini-spa. Done the right way, the loo can really woo.

A hot shower or a bubble bath can be a very relaxing experience, especially if shared with your partner. And, the first step to romance is to be able to

relax. Dim the lights. Light some candles. Put on some romantic music (preferably one you acquired from BMG's buy one get twelve CD's promotion). And, be sure to have fluffy, just out-of-the-dryer towels on hand to dry off.

Make It Sweet

For some reason we associate sweets with love. A great place for free sweets is See's Candy. They always offer a chocolate morsel when you enter. Bring about three hats and a few pairs of sunglasses and over an hour you can walk away with enough chocolate to befriend a village of Oompa-Loompas.

But, this year not only share something sweet, but make it together. When a couple works on a project together (planting a garden, painting a bedroom or baking chocolate chip cookies), they become more connected, closer and playful.

So, make some pudding, bake a pie or create your own version of a Valentine's Day sundae. And, if you can, be sure to use chocolate. Chocolate, especially dark chocolate, has a chemical called phenylethylamine, which mimics the brain chemistry of a person in love. So, stock up on the sweet stuff. (Tip for frugal lovers: buy Valentine's chocolate on February 15th when it all goes on sale for half-price. Then, break it out when your lover least expects it.)

Sometimes When We Touch

Here's a cost-efficient gift but one that is extremely powerful. All through Valentine's Day, make it a point to put your hands on your partner. Do it consciously. Be aware of your actions. Hold hands in public. Hug when you say good-bye in the morning and when you greet later in the day. Cuddle on the sofa as you watch TV and play with your partner's hair.

When you touch your partner in a loving way, their brain releases a chemical called oxytocin. This stuff should be bottled and sold on Ebay to the highest bidder. It's the key to romance in a relationship. Oxytocin brings us closer to our Valentine's target and cements our bond. It makes us feel calm, relaxed and puts us in a state of euphoric bliss. So, touch each other for goodness sake!

Slip Slidin'

Take your spouse to a park or school with a playground. Then, let loose. Let the kid in you out and have some fun. A part of what makes love so blissful is playfulness. If you aren't allowing yourself to be playful with your partner and everything is serious and uptight, you're missing an important facet of your connection.

Spin yourselves silly on the merry-go-round. Go down the slide together. Take turns pushing each other on the swings. The American playground is virtually the cheap man's Magic Mountain. You'll be surprised, though. If you just let go and allow yourself to feel young with your partner, your love starts to feel fresh again, kind of like it did when you first fell in love.

Do It

Lucky us; sex doesn't cost a dime (unless, of course, your Valentine's date calls you "Big Daddy" and needs to verify your credit card before proceeding). And, if you're going the frugal route this Valentine's Day, we're not talking microwave sex, the take-off-the-wrapper, pop-it-into-the-oven, sixty-seconds-later-ding!-your-done sex. No, for sex to be more than physical, you need to spend time, start slowly and work yourself up. We're talking Barry White, Marvin Gaye, rock-your-socks, need-to-smoke-a-cigarette-when-I'm-done-although-I'm-a-nonsmoker sex. This Valentine's Day, think intimacy more than a race; make it an event.

Pull out the good sheets. Light some candles (you know, candles are an inexpensive source of easy atmosphere. They can make almost any event romantic. After Valentine's Day reuse the candles when you're doing your taxes. Guaranteed aphrodisiac.) Play some slow romantic love songs and make the night a memorable one.

Valentine's Day doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg (or even a finger and toe). But to make this one-day-a-year worthwhile, you will need to use creativity and put out some effort. In the big picture, creativity and effort always trump cash. So, put your wallet back in your pocket and start a new tradition.

Leon Scott Baxter lives in Santa Barbara. He's written for newspapers and magazines across the nation. Visit his website, www.CouplesCommittedToLove.com, for more Valentine's Day ideas, relationship advice and articles for couples.