

# A relationship doctor's guide to a loving and satisfying relationship

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Relationships can be hard work sometimes, but with the right tools it could be easier to work through problems. Sex and relationship expert Dr Ellen Harley guides us through various tips which could help us work on relationship issues in a constructive manner.

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It is indeed a blessing if you found someone you want to share your life with and who feels the same. An intimate relationship has to be nurtured for it to grow and flourish. Below is a list of 'tips' that can ensure relationship satisfaction. I gathered from research evidence and actual experience from my patients (who said it works!):

### **Be appreciative of the company of your partner**

One of the most poignant remarks I have ever heard came from a newly widowed patient of mine –'I don't just miss having someone to do things with, I miss much more of having someone to do nothing with'. Relationships are not about continuous excitement and passion, it is about feeling comfortable and secure in your partner's presence. Try to enjoy the ordinary routine things that you do together – take a leisurely long walk, watching a TV programme together, try out a new recipe, sharing a joke, talk about your day at work. That said, you should still make an effort to do something special together and plan time for enjoyable activities without distraction.

### **Promote feelings of love and intimacy**

Remember how you met, what attracted you to each other in the first place. For every negative thought you have about your partner, counterbalance that thought with a positive one. Romantic and thoughtful gestures like writing love letters and giving small presents to each other can encourage positive and pleasurable feelings. Show your love for your partner through caring actions that can speak louder than just words. Words are also important, pay your partner compliments and praise when appropriate. Physical affection is extremely important, and often works best when it is taken out of the sexual arena. Spontaneous kissing and hugging, stroking, holding hands are ways of showing

love, affection and intimacy. Don't be afraid to feedback to your partner how much you appreciate and enjoy these gestures.

In therapy I often ask each partner to write down the following:

- 3 things that your partner can do to make you feel good
- 3 things that you think you can do to make your partner feel good

You will be pleasantly surprised when you compare notes.

### **Listen to your partner**

There is 'listening' and there is 'hearing'. The difference being that listening makes your partner feel respected and validated. It is important to listen to your partner without being judgemental, do not prematurely interrupt or interpret or talk about your own point of view.

Learn the following techniques:

**Mirroring** – Repeat back to your partner what was actually said, not what you thought was said, by repeating key words that were used. In order to do this you have to really concentrate and listen to what your partner is saying.

**Validate** – This doesn't mean you have to agree with your partner, but that you try to put yourself in your partner's shoes and to understand things from your partner's perspective. For example- 'What you said makes sense to me, because you are worried about losing your job and that we may not have enough money, you feel that it is unwise to spend too much on our next holiday'

**Empathise**- This is about trying to understanding your partner's feelings. For example 'I can imagine that you must feel insecure and anxious about our financial future' You should urge your partner to give feedback, to check out whether you have correctly understood what was said.

### **Learn to resolve conflict and solve problem**

All relationships have conflict. Couples who compromise, negotiate and work out problems together, tend to be happier and more satisfied. Couples who shy away from dealing with conflict and anger can end up with more pain and resentment within the relationship. The ability to really listen to and communicate effectively with your partner goes a long way to help resolve conflict. One of the most common mistakes made by couples is to 'mind read' and make assumptions of each other's beliefs and behaviour.

Try not to be critical and place blame on your partner. Do not judge or explain your partner's actions with your own standard. Be very clear that you may not like or agree what your partner has done, but that does not necessarily mean that you do not like your partner as a person. One good technique to use when putting your point across is to start your sentence with 'I', not 'you'. Try using a three-part statement as below:

I feel (x) when you (y) because (z)

For example, instead of saying 'you never help with the housework', try 'I feel overwhelmed by the amount of housework when you do not help because I don't have time to relax'. Other obstacles to resolving conflict are: bringing up the past; making threats, setting ultimatums, bribery and blackmail; using sarcasm, playing the victim, or distracting from the issue at hand by sidetracking and talking about other irrelevant topics. Be mindful of not just words, but non-verbal signals (eye rolling, sneering, sighing) that can convey hostility, contempt and disgust. All these emotions are destructive in a relationship and can destroy intimacy. Another intimacy killer is the emotional withdrawal in the face of conflict or argument (sulking). This not only gets in the way of communication, it also builds up resentment and frustration between partners. Instead of winners and losers, try to find a middle ground through a process of negotiation and compromise.

## **Learn to forgive and to trust again**

Loving and hurting go hand in hand. Only people we love have the power to hurt us, and vice versa. It is useful to remember that none of us is perfect, that we are fallible beings, and can intentionally or unintentionally hurt others. We may forget anniversary dates, make a thoughtless comment, make nasty remarks when angry. Some people have affairs which is often a symptom, not the cause of a relationship in trouble. At such times you will feel betrayed and hurt, and no longer feel that you can trust again, in case you get hurt again. Sometimes you may be able to forgive but unable to forget. This is the moment when you are likely to make decisions that you may regret later. It is important to share with your partner your feelings of hurt and vulnerability. Talk things through using listening and conflict resolution techniques mentioned in this article, and share any emotions that you both experienced. Think about how your own behaviour may have contributed to the problem and take responsibility for it. Are there any mitigating circumstances on your partner's part? You may need to seek professional couple counselling if you are unable to sort this out between yourselves. Remember, you chose your partner and had made a commitment to share your lives together. If you cannot forgive and cannot trust your partner then you will not be able to have the future that you planned to have when you first decided to get together. There may be other important issues to consider: children, other family members, financial and other practical implications. Ask yourself: Is your relationship worth fighting for? If it is then fight for its survival, bearing in mind that things will not be the same again, but can be just as good if not better. There are exceptions. If you experience abuse (be it emotional, physical or sexual), or the presence of addiction or serious mental health problems in your relationship, then you must seek professional advice and assistance.

## **Renegotiate key responsibilities within your relationship**

Often we enter a relationship with some ideas and expectations of what our role will be. This perception of our role is usually influenced by how our parents functioned within their relationship, or by what we learned from our peers and social experiences. For example, some of us may feel that partners should share household chores, childcare and finances regardless of their gender; some may believe that it is the men who should be the main breadwinner and women to care for domestic issues. Couples who have very clear and rigid roles expectations and behaviours will find it harder to cope with any unexpected role change. Change of roles can occur throughout a relationship due to external factors. For example, if a husband is made redundant then his wife may unexpectedly find herself having to find a job or be the main breadwinner. This couple will need to be flexible and adaptable in order to manage this role change through discussion and negotiation.

## **Give each other space**

The flip side of Intimacy is that it can create conflict. It is understandable that when you spend time together you expose each other to potential disagreements and disappointments. Different individuals may define or handle intimacy differently. People can have different preference to the amount and intensity of intimate contact. We need to be separate as individuals in order to be close and together as a couple. So try to give each other space, spend time doing enjoyable things independently from your partner, for example, learning something new, indulge in hobbies and other recreational activities, time out with your own friends etc. That way you can develop your own individuality and increase your self confidence and self worth. You will be more interesting and appealing to your partner.

## **Learn to have good sex**

Generally speaking sex and intimacy are close bedfellows and they enhance each other. If your relationship is good then sex usually is good. Many things can get in the way of sexual intimacy, for example unresolved conflict, demands of childcare, other stresses and worries in life, boredom and predictability of sexual activities. Factors that can have a negative effect on sexual desire and function include relationship difficulties, physical and mental health problems, cultural, religious and early life experiences (please see my other article: An overview of sexual dysfunction). It is important to understand what sex means to your partner. Some of us see sex as a way of becoming intimate, while others can only become sexual when they feel intimate and trusting towards their partner. There

is no rule of thumb to dictate how many times you make love for it to be 'normal'. Often people miss the quality, not quantity of sex. The aim is to improve the quality, not to increase the frequency. Make an effort with your physical appearance and keep healthy habits. Try to introduce elements of surprise in your sex lives – use of sexual aids, body massage, try different positions. Sometimes the introducing a temporary sexual ban can be stimulating.

There are relationships that are asexual –meaning sexual intercourse no longer happens. This is not a problem provided both partners are agreeable to this, and maintain other kinds of intimacy, such as being physically affectionate, emotionally committed and involve with each other's lives.

*Do you have any comments/more tips? Leave me a message.*