
Relationships – tips for success

Summary

- A good relationship doesn't just happen – you have to work at it.
 - All couples experience problems and challenges in their relationships.
 - There are many things you can do to help build healthy and happy relationships and prepare for the challenges along the way.
 - Relationships change. You need to be aware of how they are changing and adapt to those changes.
 - If problems become too difficult or complex, consider seeking the help of a counsellor.
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A 'good relationship' means different things to different people. However, good adult relationships generally involve two people who respect each other, can communicate, and have equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities. Most people would also expect their relationship with their partner to include love, intimacy, sexual expression, commitment, compatibility and companionship.

Working at a relationship

Most couples want to have a successful and rewarding relationship, yet it is normal for couples to have ups and downs. To meet these challenges, and to keep your relationship healthy and happy, you need to work at it. Relationships are like bank accounts – if there are fewer deposits than withdrawals, you will run into difficulties.

Tips for a successful relationship

Tips that may help you improve your relationship (and be better prepared to meet the challenges along the way) include:

- Talk to each other and communicate your needs – don't wait for your partner to try to guess what is going on with you.
 - If you have something to bring up, do it gently – going on the attack rarely achieves a positive outcome.
 - Listen to each other – often we are so busy defending ourselves or making our own point that we don't hear what our partner is saying. Let your partner know that you have heard them before you give them your response.
 - Remember the positives about your partner – this helps protect your relationship. One critical comment needs five positive comments to counteract its effect. Think carefully before criticising.
 - Make repair attempts – if your attempts to talk about an issue don't go as planned, try not to let the situation become even more negative (such as not talking for extended periods or ignoring the other person's attempts). Saying sorry or touching your partner in a caring manner shows you care, even though you disagree.
 - Spend time together – make your relationship a priority and make time for each other, even if you have to book it in. Regular 'deposits in your relationship bank account' will help protect your relationship.
 - Work on feeling good about yourself – this will help the way you feel about your relationship.
 - Accept and value differences in others, including your partner. We often choose people who have qualities and abilities we would like more of. This is one of the reasons why our relationships offer us significant opportunities to grow and develop as people. Remind yourself of this.
 - Make plans – set goals for your relationship and plan for your future. This shows that you are both in the relationship for the long term.
 - Be supportive – try not to judge, criticise or blame each other; we are all human. Remind yourself that you are a team, and in order for the team to be successful, you each have to cheer the other on.
 - Learn from arguments – accept that arguments will happen, and try to resolve them with respect. The
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strongest predictor of divorce is 'contempt', which is any action whereby your partner feels 'put down' by you, whether it is the tone of your voice or what you say. In arguments, we sometimes become overwhelmed and this often leads to behaviours that harm our relationship.

- Stay calm during disagreements – or if this is not possible, take time out. Taking an 'us' perspective that prioritises the relationship rather than a 'you' and 'me' perspective can be very useful.
- Look at your part in the conflict rather than focusing only on your partner's contribution. Your partner is more likely to acknowledge their contribution if you do the same. Research has shown that relationships fall into difficulty when partners begin to think 'here we go again' and this negative cycle is associated with loneliness, hurt and disappointment.
- Be sexually considerate – be affectionate (sometimes a lingering kiss or a warm hug are just as important). Accept that individuals have different sex drives and to sustain a healthy and happy sex life requires negotiation. A reduction in a couple's physical connection is often a warning sign of problems in a relationship.
- Be attentive – demonstrate your commitment to the relationship. It is what you do for someone that tells them that you love them. We tend to give our partner what we hope to receive but they may prefer another form of affection. Do they like gifts, quality time with you, a note or a cooked meal? Once you know what they like, make an effort to provide it.
- Enjoy yourself – have fun and celebrate your life together. Rituals can enhance your relationship. It's also important to try new things as a couple. Doing fun activities together is very important, as often 'deep and meaningful' conversations about couple issues can turn into disagreements which leave you both feeling worse, not better. Fun activities are like glue.
- Be flexible – let your relationship grow and adapt as you both change.
- Share power – ensure that each of you feels that your opinion counts. Research shows that relationships where the female partner feels that she can influence her partner are the most successful.

Successful long-term relationships

In a long-term relationship, it's easy to assume you know all there is to know about your partner. But people change. Try to be aware of what is happening in your relationship and understand who your partner is and where they are at.

Stay curious about, but respectful of, each other. It is really important to stay up to date about your partner. Friendship is at the basis of all successful long-term relationships. Successful couples tend to be realists who recognise that a relationship will go through ups and downs.

Seeking help for relationship problems

If there is something in your relationship that is difficult or painful to talk about to each other, consider seeing a counsellor. A counsellor can be of great value to help you talk things through, particularly if you are going over old terrain and each of you is feeling isolated, disappointed or hurt by the lack of progress.

Where to get help

- **Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia** (PACFA) National Register (Family and Relationship Therapy) Tel. (03) 9486 3077
- **Australian Association of Relationship Counsellors** Tel. 1800 806 054
- **Relationships Australia** is a provider of specialist family and relationship services, including counselling, mediation, dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education, community support, employee assistance programs and professional training. Services and programs are available nationally Tel. 1300 364 277
- **1800 RESPECT** is the national sexual assault and family violence counselling service for people living in Australia Tel. 1800 737 732
- **beyondblue** is an independent non-for profit organisation that provides telephone and online support for depression, anxiety, and related disorders, as well as online resources and information Tel. 1300 22 4636
- **MensLine Australia** provides national telephone and online support, information and referrals for men with family and relationship concerns Tel. 1300 78 99 78

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- **Family Relationship Advice Line**, Australian Government Tel. 1800 050 321
- **Qlife** provides telephone and online support to help lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities work towards better health, including mental health Tel. 1800 184 527

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