



Muse

Relationships- A brief guide for Couples

By Cindy Trevitt, Registered Professional Counsellor

Relationships. They nourish us, they challenge us, and sometimes they drive us to distraction! Here are just a few suggestions on some common issues.

Personality. Often there are different personality styles - a kind of yin-yang thing going on. One is tidier while the other is "relaxed". One is verbose the other is quiet. One wants more sex, the other less. One is emotional, the other is distant. Wherever there is a problem, often there is an imbalance. For the one



who is dominant in a particular area, it may be best to take a genuine step back and allow space for the other to come forward. This requires patience and faith. Embrace differences – look for the benefits.

Don't try to change your partner. Respect and acceptance are essential to a successful and happy relationship. Let them be who they are. Refrain from trying to control or make them into someone else.

Communicate. Speak assertively, descriptively and specifically. If your methods aren't working there is a chance that you need to change them. "Doesn't the fact that I've been stonily silent for three days clearly indicate I am deeply hurt?" BIG NOPE! You must express yourself succinctly and in words. Address concerns right at the time (unless it is inappropriate to do so). Don't use emails, text messages and Facebook to talk to each other - they create distance and misunderstandings. Don't use a third person such as a friend or relative to communicate either. Learn to ask for what you want and state how you feel clearly.

Don't expect your partner to read your mind. If the words haven't tumbled out of your mouth, do not expect them to

know what you are thinking or feeling. So many couples make the mistake of hinting, asking leading questions, or assuming that their partner should instinctively know what they want or feel. It is 100% your job to convey your feelings. Not theirs.

Don't use the words: always, never, every time, etc. This only exacerbates the disagreement and generally isn't true. Stick to specifics. Even better, focus on what you *want* instead of complaining. Rather than saying, "I always do all the housework around here and you do nothing," say, "I'm feeling overburdened with housework and would like some help. Would you mind taking over the vacuuming and dusting?" (Keep in mind that solutions need to be negotiated not dictated).

Edit yourself. Avoid expressing every critical thought.

Be soft. When starting up a difficult discussion, refrain from opening with a critical or contemptuous remark. Be assertive but not confrontational. Raise issues gently and without blame.

Accept influence. When your partner asks for something consider giving it. Be flexible and open.

Empathize. Learn how to be a good listener. Actively listen without agreeing or disagreeing. Paraphrase the words your partner is stating – even if it's about you such as, "You're feeling sad because I don't spend more time with you," or "You're angry because you feel you're taken for granted," or "You'd like me to understand you better and see where you're coming from." It is about showing them you understand they are mad, hurt, elated, etc. Maintain constant eye-contact and open body language. Show respect even when you disagree. Delay defending yourself. Reiterate until your partner is completely satisfied you understand.

Don't hurl judgments, insults, and sarcastic comments. These are only methods of venting designed to hurt – and do. Most likely it will only engender more hurt and anger not to mention additional ammunition to be

used against you later. A more poignant statement might be, "When you walk away from me, I feel very hurt, angry and powerless," or "When you defend yourself before hearing me out, I feel diminished."

Have fair-fight ground rules. For some couples it is helpful to have a mutually-agreed upon set of rules. Some things may include: No name calling, shouting, hitting, throwing things or walking away. Time-outs can be permissible with the understanding that you come back ready to talk.

Keep the drama down! If you are prone to yelling, outbursts, resorting to tears, having little tantrums, storming in and out of the room, throwing things, bringing unsuspecting bystanders, friends or family suddenly into an argument – stop. This is highly manipulative and immature behaviour. Behave in a straightforward, assertive, adult manner. Receive words from your partner calmly. Be honest about your feelings. Learn to communicate effectively. If you've got a drama addiction, consider seeking help or channeling it somewhere else like acting class.

No ultimatums or threats of break up. This, if unmet, will eliminate your credibility and if not done is only a last-ditch effort to manipulate, get what you want or vent your frustration. In any case it is fruitless and only causes further damage.

Only argue one thing at a time.

Don't stonewall and don't walk away wordlessly mid-conversation. When your partner is addressing something that makes you feel uncomfortable, listen. Don't walk away. It's normal to experience some discomfort when hearing unpleasant statements but stay involved. A mature relationship sometimes involves things we don't like. Don't automatically swallow what they have to say either. Give it serious consideration. Paraphrase your understanding back to them to ensure clarity. Ask for a moment to consider it. Give feedback.

Apologize! If you did something wrong,

just give a straightforward, heartfelt, sincere apology to their face. Don't say, "I apologize if I hurt you". Not "if". You did it. Say you're sorry. Own up to what you did. Don't look elsewhere. Don't bark, "I said I'm sorry!" Repeat the apologies. Listen to what your partner has to say.

Be accountable! If you did it, you did it. Don't mince words, defer, deflect, deny, counter blame, mumble, stonewall, stare, look elsewhere, distract or change the subject. Deal with it. Treat your partner's feelings seriously. Ask your partner what they want and consider their request. Provide a counter-offer if you don't like what you heard. Engage in the problem-solving process in a direct and cooperative fashion. Look for a solution you can both live with. Don't dictate. Remember denial only falsely preserves your ego.

Identify problems. Often time couples will just argue in circles and grow increasingly frustrated. This usually means they haven't identified the core issue and sorely need new problem-solving methods. Try to stop and identify what is really at the heart of the matter and deal with *that*. Sometimes there's more than one 'heart' which is okay, deal with them one at a time.

Negotiate solutions. Often couples get stuck in the blaming or problem-identifying stage which ends in a dead end, silence or hurt feelings. Try focusing on finding a solution you can both accept. Think about what you want to happen rather than focussing on the 'wrongs'. When there is no simple solution to problems, one of the most generous acts you can give your partner is just accepting the problem, recognizing that they still love and care for you deeply even though your circumstances have changed.

Identify goals. Often we spend so much time reacting to the other's offences; we're not really focussed on our common goals or even know what they are.

Find out what your partner wants. Give *that* to them. Don't give what you want and need. For example, if you want space when you're angry, don't assume your partner wants the same – find out what they want. Respect differences.

From Gottman's Marriage Tips 101: "Successful couples know how to exit an argument. Happy couples know how to repair the situation before an argument gets completely out of control. Successful repair attempts include: changing the topic to something completely unrelated, using humour, stroking your partner with a caring remark ("I understand that this is hard for you"), making it clear you're on common ground ("This is our problem"), and backing down (in marriage, as in the martial art Aikido, you have to yield to win)."

Think about what you want to happen rather than focussing on the 'wrongs'.

Common problems involve money, household chores and childrearing. Have frequent, frank open discussions around these issues. Sit down together at a mutually convenient time when you are both in a reasonable mood and make a list of what needs to be done and start writing down the things you're willing to do. Negotiate these items until you are both satisfied. Revisit this document regularly. Sometimes our perception of what is going on is far removed from reality. The best solution is to obtain objectivity.

Take responsibility for your own needs and wants. Don't rely on your partner to fulfill every need of yours. You own your happiness – to place this responsibility on your partner is to decline ownership and a way to lay blame on your partner for your misery. If you've got problems - deal with them. Don't take it out on your partner. If you're waiting



for someone else to fix you - then wait you shall. Ensure that you are a happy, healthy, balanced, cared for person whose life is fulfilling and meaningful and bring that person to the relationship.

Don't sacrifice with the secret hopes of getting something in return or to be a "martyr". This only fosters disappointment and resentment. Give to the relationship freely and ensure that your own needs are not overly compromised.

Don't command/demand what the other should do. This only gets resistance, arguments or resentment. Think how you feel when someone is telling you what to do. Respect the other person to be able to do things their way even if they make mistakes. Your job is to support not teach or parent. It takes away their power when we micromanage, hang over their shoulder and correct them. If you do see your partner unwittingly

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headed for disaster, offer advice respectfully. Say, "You may or may not have already considered this but if you do this, I think this consequence may happen..."

Your partner is entitled to have a different opinion from you. A difference of opinion doesn't mean your opinion is discredited. Don't impose your will onto your partner. You can make requests but remember you don't always get what you want. Your partner has the right to say no. As do you. Just because they don't do things your way or understand your perspective doesn't mean they love you any less or don't care about your wants and wishes. Everyone does the best they can and understandably guards their own autonomy.



Don't nit pick. Don't get hung up on minutiae. Pick your battles! Don't die on

every hill. Learn to let the little things go. They had a slightly cranky tone when they were having a bad day? Is this truly grounds for make it or break it? Allow your partner the same liberty of *being human* you would like to enjoy.

No disdain! For job, looks, character, possessions, family, interests, etc.

Refrain from saying "I don't know" or "I don't know what you want from me". Be a strong individual in the relationship with thoughts and opinions. Engage. Don't be passive. Be a problem-solver. Try to guess. Think.

Don't spy or snoop. Don't read your partner's emails, mail, or journals (even if they did "accidentally" leave it open). This just fuels your distrust. If you have an issue, address it openly.

Stay out of your partners head. You aren't them nor do you have Madame Sophia's psychic powers. Don't tell them what you think they are *really* doing or meaning. Don't presume or project your own fears and beliefs. Act based on concrete evidence, not suspicions. If you saw her glancing sideways at an attractive barista that is hardly grounds for concluding that she plans on starting an affair. That is exactly what you saw, "a sideways glance," perhaps "appreciative" at worst. If it sparks feelings of inadequacy or abandonment, find ways to deal with that. Reassure yourself that you are the same superb person you were five minutes before-barista. If your partner has been unfaithful or leans in that direction, then *that* is the actual issue and needs to be addressed. If not... you have your answer. To quote Oprah, (there I did it), when someone tells you who they are, believe them.

For those of you who "appreciate" others with the consistency of free running water, you might consider toning it down. Let's face it; this is just grounds for fights. Nothing says, "You're second," like whip-head syndrome. Just cut it out. Is a momentary glance worth the hassle and heartbreak? And absolutely refrain on

commenting on the physical attributes of individuals passing by.

If you have jealousy issues, get help with that. A little jealousy says you care and don't take your partner for granted but a lot does not. Jealousy is often more about feelings of inadequacy or fear of abandonment.



If you have affairs and trysts, be accountable. Each time you do this, you harm your relationship (unless you have an open relationship agreement). Often people do this to 'get back' at their partner or because of issues they have around certain painful feelings. Don't justify your actions by saying that your partner did 'this' so you deserve this or it makes it okay. It doesn't. If nothing else, own up to yourself that you're not being considerate of your partner's feelings and deal with that. Consider seeking help.

Getting over the affair or lying. Be accountable. No excuses or blaming. Acknowledge what you did – again and again. Take reasonable steps to rebuild trust: be where you say you're going to be and be there when you say you will. Be extra careful not to hide anything no matter how trivial. For the person 'cheated on', don't badmouth your partner to others. Don't stalk or check on your partner. It may be hard to get over and take time. Do a ritual to say goodbye to the past – write a letter, burn it, etc.

Be respectful and polite. Would you use those words or that tone with your boss or your friend? Poor treatment is a reflection of you and you alone regardless of what your partner did.

Be compassionate. Your partner is doing the best she/he can just like you.

Ask yourself, "What can I do to be a good partner?"

Don't whine to get your way.

Don't manipulate or have hidden agendas. Don't ask questions to which you already have the answer. Don't set traps. Be a forthright, above-board somewhat transparent entity in the relationship.



If you have passive aggressive tendencies – change them. Learn to be assertive.

Deal breakers. Try to get your ‘deal breakers’ out on the table before you embark on a relationship not *during*. However, if it still happens, consider seeking help or mediation. Look for compromise. Negotiate. Remember that your partner has a right to be different from you. You, too, are entitled to have your wants.

Aggression and abuse are never okay. Don’t put up with poor treatment from your partner right from the start. Teach them how to treat you. If your partner is calling you names, berating you, hitting you, threatening to hit you, throwing things at you, or yelling at you, you need to take a good hard look at the relationship. Have high standards for yourself and your relationship.

Staying together for the kids. A hugely controversial subject; however, keep in mind that your children deserve a happy, healthy home. Faking it or struggling through a nasty relationship for their sake only gives them a ridiculously unfair burden, certainly very poor models of what relationships look like and miserable parents. Not much of a gift. If you’re having problems seek professional help.

Forgive mistakes. Their mistakes are because of their weaknesses not because they intend to hurt us. Holding on to hurt and harbouring doubts about your spouse’s intentions destroys relationships.

Show you cherish them and their needs. Look your partner in the eyes and tell them how you appreciate all the times they opened the car door for you or took out the trash or brought you your coffee. Show your love often with words, actions, hugs, tokens of appreciation and spontaneous acts of kindness. Remember their birthday, important things happening at work or how their friend is doing. Follow up. Ask them how they’re coping with a problem. Tell them how funny and inspirational they are. Tell them how it makes you feel when they listen attentively and say just the right thing.

Engage emotionally. Make steady efforts to connect with your partner on an emotional and personal level. Talk about things that are deeply meaningful to you and inquire about the same for them.

Make frequent, consistent and meaningful time for each other. Continue to get away together, escape to your favourite holiday spot, café, or even a walk.

Remember you’re in this together. This relationship, and everything in it, belongs to both of you.

Identify what has worked in the past and do more of that.

Focus on the positive. A relationship where the focus is on the negative is bound to languish. A relationship where many positive comments are made is more likely to be a happy one.

Coming to counselling in the midst of a crisis is like trying to light a candle in a windstorm. But then again, who finds help when they don’t need it? The average couple waits six years before seeking counselling – that’s a long time to be unhappy. Consider knowing what your options are well before-hand as opposed to last minute. That way, seeking help is one less stressor to deal with.

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