

How to Build & Maintain Happy Intimate Relationships

Most individuals would like to have a loving intimate relationship that lasts a lifetime, yet only some achieve such a lasting attachment. Why is this so? One factor is that making intimate relationships work is a far more difficult task than is generally recognized. In order to enhance the likelihood of a satisfying relationship, it helps to first understand essential social and psychological factors that are involved in the process of relationship formation and maintenance.

Family therapist Myron Weiner suggested that most romantic relationships develop and evolve in these five predictable stages:

Stage 1: Early Courtship – The Moment Before Falling In Love In this stage, potential partners are “sizing up” one another. Partners are usually on their best behavior and exchange only carefully edited versions of their life histories. Making a good impression is one of the essential goals.

Stage 2: Passionate Love In this “honeymoon period,” some couples start developing loving feelings. This stage is defined by idealizing our partner -- tending to notice mostly positive qualities and overlooking shortcomings. There may be an assumption that our partner can and will fulfill all of our needs. Partners start to “fuse” emotionally and physically, becoming closer and more involved with one another. Our former single life with its old friends, chores and work responsibilities becomes less central while we are building our new life around our current romance, making it the center of our attention.

Stage 3: “Unmasking” Unfortunately, we can’t stay on our best behavior forever. Soon we start noticing our partner’s imperfections as well as showing our own.

Stage 4: Changing the Other The disappointed partners start to express their dissatisfaction, attempting to force their beloved to become what they think s/he should be. Sometimes this change is possible, but usually it is not.

Stage 5: Resolution The resolution stage is a critical period for relationships. One’s idealized partner is becoming a real person, sometimes close to “perfect” and sometimes far from it. Partners may start to understand each other better, make some mutual adjustments, accept each other’s “annoying” habits and ultimately, accept their partner for who s/he is. Some couples are able and willing to do this. For many others, things may start escalating from bad to worse and they may choose to exit the relationship.

What factors help couples to accept each other and sustain their relationship? The accommodation model of relationship interactions (Huston, 2001) suggests that the negative interactions in a relationship can be lessened or avoided if the partners are psychologically compatible. Thus, **interpersonal compatibility and adaptability** are very important for a happy and satisfying relationship. An important factor to remember is that both partners bring into the relationship many stable personal dimensions, such as sense of identity, values and beliefs, attitudes, stereotypes, intelligence, skills, temperament, and passions. These dimensions frame our expectations for the relationship, our partner, and ourselves, and thus influence our behavior. Partners may be unable or unwilling to change many of these dimensions, as these are developed over the years and may, in large part, define who we are.

Here are some recommendations, based on psychological research findings, which may be helpful in promoting happiness and longevity in your relationships:

Pay Attention To Your Relationship Quality and Satisfaction In Its Early Stages. Researchers suggest that primary satisfaction with a relationship usually remains quite stable across time (Huston, 2001). The types and frequency of conflicts that dating couples have and their initial level of happiness with one another may be close to or the same as they will be once these couples decide to live together or to marry.

Maximize Positive Affect and Good Times Together. Ideally, couples enjoy joint activities and their time together; however, some level of disagreement is inevitable. Partners are happier and more committed when positive interactions between partners outweigh negative ones by a ratio of at least 5:1 (Gottman, 1994).

Be Kind in Appraisals of Your Partner. Researchers report that frequent and overt criticism in a relationship drastically lowers partners' satisfaction (Gottman, 1994). However, in every couple partners may occasionally disapprove of each other's behavior and feel disappointed and/or angry. In these situations, partners' ability to create and maintain "positive illusions" about each other, that is to be less negative and more kind in their evaluation and feedback of their partners, can help to enhance relationship satisfaction (Murray, 1996). This means being able to link partner's "transgressions" to their positive qualities and behaviors. For example, a partner may think, "Yes, he/she is moody today but overall he/she is most fun person to be with!"

Evaluate Your Partner as More Desirable Than Others. The relationship is more likely to persist and stay satisfying when intimates see their partners as much more desirable than any other conceivable partner (Johnson, 1982, Rusbult, 1987). Our appraisal of alternatives relates to the degree of love and liking that we hold for our current partner and is a telling sign of whether the relationship will last. The more we like him/her, the less likely we are to desire, consider and rank favorably other potential partners.

Share Compatible Goals and Mutually Acceptable Plans with Your Partner. All of human behavior is goal driven to some extent, and we enter our relationships with a set of personal goals, desires and expectations. Even though some mutual adaptation and adjustment may take place, incompatible goals and solving personal aims at the expense of another person results in disappointment and anger, and generates tacit and overt conflicts (Stein & Levine, 1990). For example, you may want to consider whether you are in agreement with your partner on if you want children and if so, when to start having them, whether you want to be more thrifty with your budget or spend it freely on traveling and entertainment, whether you want to live in a large city or in a more rural setting, and so on. Easy to overlook at the beginning, disagreements on these kinds of issues may lead to conflicts and potentially, separation.

Share Equal Give-and-Take Interactions. Researchers suggest that even our interpersonal relationships are governed to an extent by some economic principles. Specifically, benefits and costs derived from interactions with our partner, both tangible and intangible, influence our level of satisfaction and commitment (Rusbult, 1987). Material or tangible costs may be buying gifts or sharing expenses, whereas "intangible investments" include sharing our time, affection, support, and advice, the "cost" of which can not be precisely determined. Thus, it is never a precise and concrete balance, but it is our perceived sense of being treated fairly and equitably overall that is most critical. Researchers suggest that partners need to reach a balance in their give-and-take exchanges as the highest satisfaction in a relationship is achieved when parties maximize joint rewards, not personal benefits (Kelley, 1979).

Balance Commitment to Your Relationship with Your Other Commitments. Lastly, at the beginning and in the course of a relationship, partners usually generate some implicit and explicit "contracts" which are tacit and/or overt agreements about the mutually acceptable behaviors and relationship duties and responsibilities. Maintaining a balance between your relationship role commitments and other personal conflicting demands and responsibilities helps to enhance relationship quality and to promote its happiness and longevity (Stein & Levine, 1990).

As it is always possible that one or both individuals may change their desires and goals as a function of forward-edge development and unforeseeable circumstances, one of the most critical components of a solid relationship is a commitment to and engagement in open communication so that differences can be resolved. Create an environment where both you and your partner are able to express your beliefs, concerns, and preferences, so that your relationship can deepen and grow over the years, whatever comes your way.

Food For Thought:

Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, and half shut afterwards

Benjamin Franklin

Love is a tender look that becomes a habit

Peter Ustinov

Love must be fostered with kind words

Ovid

A good argument settles an issue without unsettling a relationship. A bad argument rarely settles any issue.

Barbara Montgomery

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