

## Health Living and Wellbeing Magazine.

### How to Maintain a Successful Relationship By Gerry Hickey

It is so sad to witness, time after time, fine people once full of hope and dreams now stuck and lost as their relationship disintegrates. It is even more sad to see that often the difficulties could have been avoided had some basic rules of relationship monitoring been implemented. Drifting within a relationship is probably one of the more serious moral crimes we commit. And the tragedy is that we are frequently unaware of it happening. Gay or heterosexual, formally married or in a stable loving partnership, the suggestions for effective monitoring are the same. We service our cars regularly, we maintain our gardens and continue to improve and cherish our homes. Yet, many if not most appear to expect our relationships to take care of themselves with the minimum of maintenance and service. This may sound clinical and shatter the unrealistic dreams of “happy ever after” fantasy but ignore this truth at your peril. I see a relationship likened to a train and the partners like each side of the track. If all three components are working in unison the relationship is evolving in the desired direction. However, if one side of the track decides to veer to the east while the other continues on its direction south the train will hit uneven ground and come to a halt. A synchronicity of movement and direction is needed for relationships to run smoothly and depend on a high level of monitoring and effort. There are some basic guidelines which we all need to be mindful of in the maintenance of successful relationships.



#### **1. Loving Oneself.**

This does not mean being full of vanity or constant mirror gazing. It means working on ones self-esteem as this is important for a healthy relationship. Unless you love yourself, it’s difficult for you to believe that anyone else will. When you truly like yourself, in spite of any failings and weaknesses you may have, confident and security evolves. You will also find it easier to allow yourself to be loved and cherished. If previous experiences have not been healthy, it’s worth working through these issues with a trusted friend or counsellor. It can be tempting to use your partner in these terms seeking reassurance, but the stronger you are as an individual, the

stronger and more equal your relationship will be. In doing this you avoid one of the most unhealthy pitfalls in the guise of co-dependency. You need a therapist and you expect your partner to be one and they fall into the role. The relationship begins to become unbalanced and the concept of mutuality is shaken and neediness creeps in.

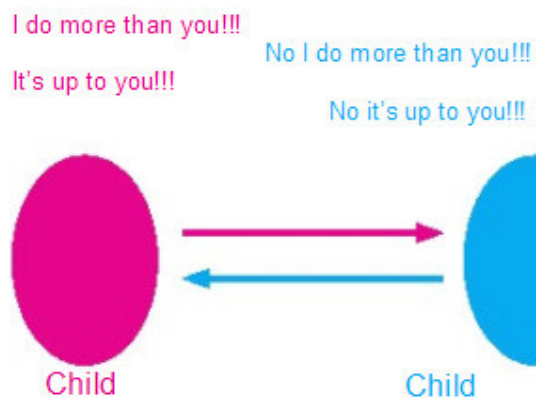
## 2. Being Committed To Be With Your Partner, Liking Them.

People who really like each other are well on track towards a healthy relationship. Being in love may seem more romantic but remember that love is an emotion that comes and goes whereas liking is a deeper more consistent emotion. Enjoying being together, agree with how each others core directions, and sharing common dreams ensures that loving feelings are constantly nearby even in difficult times. Warm words of encouragement and support within a relationship build trust and respect. And it helps each person's self-esteem when they are genuinely complemented by the other.

## 3. Have Quality Time

The importance of a relationship can be measured by the amount of time we're willing to devote to it. Initially, couples instinctively prioritize their relationship. But as time goes by they are busier with external factors and time together may not have the same importance. It is then that drifting becomes a factor. Making the relationship a priority may appear like sacrificing other activities, but remember it's an investment in your future happiness.

## 4. Communicate



I suggest that this is the single most important factor in ensuring healthy consistency in any relationship. So many partners unwittingly expect their partners to be mind-readers and psychics. Others are unwilling or unable to talk in a meaningful and effective manner. Healthy communication is essential for successful

relationships. It's the only way you can let your partner know who you really are, what you really want and why you behave the way you do. Talking is the way we let

each other into our private worlds. And this all depends on what I call the W.H.O. principle. There has to be a WILLINGNESS to talk. There has to be HONESTY in what is said and there has to be OPEN-MINDNESS as to the other person's response. It also needs each other to LISTEN to the other person and really HEAR what they are saying. This means asking questions in a non-threatening manner and getting clarification of what is being expressed. Sadly, many of us interact in an unhealthy manner with our partners based on past unresolved experiences. These may reflect relationships we had with family of origin members or in early friendships. An example of such interaction is the Child – Child Mode. This is typified when the level of communication descends to that of the playground. It becomes competitive, trivial and directionless.

People stuck in this mode avoid responsibility and accountability for their actions and may have got away with this for a long period of their lives. They can be demanding, prone to tantrums and silences. Just like a normal child really. It may be helpful for children to externalize internal frustrations and energy through this type of communication but it has no place in a healthy adult relationship. Adults ought to have grown out of this mode and if they have not their relations will be rocky and unwholesome. Another example of ineffective communication is reflected in PARENT - PARENT Mode. This is typified when the level of communication is at that of the caretaker and manager. It concerns external issues and is very good at sorting things out. Of course this is appropriate within a partnership but it can be used as a means of avoiding the real issues needing attention within the relationship. People often protest that they have good communication when in fact it is at this level and ignores the need for quality inter-personal expression. Examples of such communication are as follows:

The negative side of such communication allows functionality flourish within the relationship and it veers towards seriousness and less fun. Everything from the weather to three month cruises is discussed, ignoring relationship issues that need to be addressed. It's the "ignoring the elephant in the room" approach. The most effective mode of verbal interaction is that of ADULT - ADULT Mode. In this mode issues are discussed in a balanced and respectful manner.

Each partner feels safe in expressing their feelings and is heard by the other. Issues are debated on rather than dictated on and the ideal result is negotiation and

compromise allowing the relationship to evolve in a healthy manner. Partners take responsibility for their actions and are willing to be accountable.

They are considerate of the other and emotionally mature enough to look at the broader context. Examples of such interaction is as follows:

The substantial communication content of successful, healthy relationships will be in the ADULT - ADULT Mode and if this is not the case it needs to be worked on and developed if the relationship is to increase consistency.

Start your questions with WHEN?, WHERE?, HOW? or WHAT? in a non-threatening tone and allow the other person the respect of then being silent as you wait for their reply. That way you will have real, genuine interpersonal communication.

Of course there will be silences, arguments and entrenched positions but at the very least there ought to be a willingness to speak about difficulties as a means of nurturing the relationship. In an overall context I suggest that the development of a healthy sense of humor is also part of the nurturing process in effective communication.

### **5. Physical Touch Is Vital.**

Hugging and other displays of physical touching are essential for human relationship building. Touch is an indication of comfort, support, protection and encouragement. Whatever about more intimate arousal and expression the basic need for physical affection never changes and ought to be fostered conscientiously.

### **6. Allowing Partners To Be Individuals.**

Partners will probably work in different environments with diverse external constraints and expectations. In the world of the corporate employee the employer can sometimes place expectations as high as the partner would have a right to place for themselves. It can be extremely difficult to balance time and commitment within such a framework. It can be practically unbearable if conflict erupts within the relationship as this is the space where one could expect to feel supported and heard. Internal strife would result in this space being unsafe and possibly avoided.

There are times when self-obsession and instant gratification within a relationship can spell its death knell.

Flexibility and delayed gratification can pay handsome dividends within a healthy relationship. So the concept of allowing partners time with their work colleagues, hobbies and interests is one needing to be clarified. The key words governing such a concept must surely be balance, fairness and motivation. These ought to be mutually agreed for the overall betterment of the relationship.

opportunities for growth and intimacy, but can also be painful. It may mean adjusting to a new way of thinking or a new way of life. It may also mean letting go of things that have been familiar and safe.

In successful relationships, couples learn to adapt and change together. They accept that change is an inevitable part of human life and support each other, for better for worse.

Working on a consistent basis with these guidelines isn't easy, but the more you can manage them on a regular basis, the stronger your relationships will be. The effort of applying them will pay substantial healthy dividends and allow the relationship to be deep rooted and more likely to withstand any turmoil and rocky periods. If nothing else, talk and keep talking but be prepared to listen also. Good Luck.

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Gerry Is a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and bound by its code of ethics and practice.

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