

Rules of Engagement for a Successful Relationship

Habits that greatly improve your Chances of having a Happy and Lasting Relationship

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Relationships are difficult... no doubt about it. The divorce rate in the US is 50% and it is higher than that for subsequent marriages. Unmarried couples are four times more likely to split than married couples.

So why do so many buck the odds and attempt serious relationships? Of course, it is because of the expected rewards. Most people feel a need for companionship and intimacy. They have a desire for another person who will lovingly share their joys and sorrows. There is a natural longing for the comfort and peace that comes with a caring partner. Case in point: 90% of people marry by age 50.

OK, so why do so many relationships fail? It is because the people enter the partnership with no idea how to make it work. I did say the word 'make'. Success is never automatic. Besides the obvious ingredients of love, attraction, and mutual admiration, a successful relationship requires work and skill. Quite often, lovers are willing to put in the work, but without the skills needed, that effort goes nowhere. Conversely, without willingness to work all the skill in the world is of no value.

I have been married four times. This fourth one has lasted longer than all the rest put together (by a long shot... 30 years) and there is every indication that it will last for the rest of our very happy lives. During this time I have learned what do and what not to do... what works and what doesn't. It is my hope that some of the skills I talk about will strike a chord with you and help you to improve your chances for happiness in your relationship.

Essential Ingredients

A relationship is a living being. It is important that certain life supporting characteristics are present.

- **Mutual Physical Attraction**
Studies show that strong physical attraction is not necessary for a successful and happy relationship. Moderate attraction is usually quite adequate. Research does show that absence of physical attraction produces significantly lower success rates. It is also true that as couples get to know each other and find more that they like about the each other, physical attraction increases.
- **Mutual Emotional Attraction**
This article is directed toward couples who consider themselves to be in love. It is important that this feeling is mutual and similar. Emotional attraction involves the desire to spend time together, to share experiences, to become one.
- **Commitment**
Commitment is essential because without it, the relationship will usually disintegrate at the first sign of trouble.
- **Similar Approach to Life**
This should be obvious. A person who wants to travel the world and party should probably not team up with someone whose life ambition is to settle down, go to church and raise a family.

Basic Psychological Truths

Everyone is hardwired, pretty much from birth, to react to stimuli in self preserving ways. This includes verbal and visual stimuli. As we mature we form beliefs about these hardwired reactions that become the basis for our interactions with others. Sometimes these beliefs are not entirely accurate. The Basic Psychological Truths mentioned here will lay the groundwork for a better understanding of how we are really wired.

1. No one can make you feel any certain way

Simply put, they don't have that kind of power over you. They cannot make you angry, happy, or sad. They can't hurt your feelings. You make yourself angry, sad, hurt or happy by what you tell yourself about them or about what they said, didn't say, did or didn't do.

The popular band Blood, Sweat and Tears did a song that had the phrase "You made me so very happy." In fact, this statement cannot be true. A more accurate line would be, "I made my self so very happy by the things I told myself about you."

In other words, your feelings are not a direct result of the actions or words of others. They are the result of your own internal conversations. You and you alone control what you tell yourself. You and you alone control how you feel.

2. Your actions and words can result in another person's feelings changing

This sounds like a contradiction to #1 above, but it's not. Even though they have complete control of their feelings, what we do or say reveals things that can impact the other person's internal conversation. For instance:

<u>If you show</u>	<u>their internal conversation is likely to be</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• kindness and understanding	This is not a threatening situation I can relax I can relate honestly
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• anger and frustration	This is a dangerous situation I need to keep my guard up I must be careful what I say
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• interest and curiosity	This is an easy conversation I'm having fun I'd like to spend more time here
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• irritation and disgust	This is a pointless conversation I am wasting my time I need to bail as soon as possible

The list goes on but you probably get the picture. We all have emotional buttons that can be pushed. Some people are better at overriding them than others. Overriding emotional buttons is a skill that can be learned. Many don't even know that they can be overridden.

3. Anger is optional

You say in response, "How is it optional? Everyone get angry sometimes." And you would be right... to a point. There is a place for anger when it is constructive. But 90% of people's anger is, in essence, the result of an internal conversation that goes something like, "They aren't doing it like I would" or "I wouldn't have said what they said."

Most of the time anger involves setting yourself as judge about what another person should or shouldn't do. I'm guessing that you don't think someone else has the right to determine how you should behave. Therefore you don't have the right of *should* over someone else. If you don't have that right then anger is unwarranted and unnecessary. Getting angry becomes optional and you own the option.

That said, you do have the right to decide that you don't like what another person did or said and to tell them so. If you can tell them in a calm manner, they are more likely to accept it. Communication is always better received when anger is not part of the equation.

To reiterate, anger is optional, avoidable, unnecessary and usually counter-productive. One of the most life changing experiences is learning to eliminate anger. See the section on Recommended Reading below. Wayne Dyer's book has an entire chapter dedicated to this.

Listening Skills

1. Don't interrupt the other person

Interrupting communicates, "I'm not interested in what you are saying. What you are saying is neither important nor relevant." This is terribly disruptive to communication. It means you are not listening. The other person is likely to say to self, "They won't listen to what I say so why should I say anything?" Furthermore, you completely deprive yourself of any possibility of truly understanding the other person.

2. Work to truly understand the other person

Make a habit of discerning what the other person meant by what they said rather than what it sounded to you like they said... especially if you didn't like it. Many times there are multiple meanings that can be taken from something a person says. The first one that pops into our heads may be wrong. The more upsetting it is – the more likely it is to be a misunderstanding. Try to remember to ask yourself, "What else could they have meant by that?" The answers you come up with might surprise you.

This discernment is not something we were born with. It is a skill that can be learned and a habit we can make.

Examples:

a. At the time of the incident in this example Angela and Janet were late teenage sisters. Angela was a year older and more studious while Janet was more attractive and tended to be a partyer. In her senior year, Angela got pregnant and Janet overheard her father talking to her mother about the news, "Well, I always thought it would be Janet," he said. Janet was very hurt, and when she moved away from home, she didn't talk to him for many years. I asked Janet what she thought he meant by what he said. She said that, of course what he meant was "Janet is the slut in the family." I asked if he could have meant anything else. She asked, "What else could it mean?" So I gave her some examples:

1. Janet is more attractive so naturally she is more likely to have sex.
2. Janet is more carefree and less inhibited.
3. Janet is more of a chip off the old block, and that is the sort of trouble I would have gotten into.
4. Janet goes to a lot more parties and has more exposure than Angela.
5. Janet is less studious and may not have been as attentive in biology class.
6. Janet drinks more and drinking leads to unsafe sex.
7. Janet appears to be more into guys than Angela.
8. Janet stays out later than Angela.
9. Janet is more like me and I have always worried about her.
10. Janet dates more than Angela so she has more opportunities to get pregnant.

That is at least ten possible other meanings for what her father had said. Janet was astonished at these possibilities and decided to resume the relationship with her father. It turned out that he didn't even remember saying it. He figured it was sort of a combination of several of them. The idea of a slut had never crossed his mind. But because Janet had thought of herself that way, she naturally thought that was what he was saying.

b. Two engineers, Joe and Fred, who have worked together for a little while but not for very long, are discussing a bridge design. Joe says, "The support weighs 8,000 lbs.

and the truss weighs 13,000 lbs. so the pylon will have to be capable of holding 21,000 lbs.” Fred says in an irritated tone, “Well I know that!”

Now, what just happened? The Fred thought Joe was implying that he couldn’t add, or that he didn’t know the two weights should be added, or maybe that Fred was just stupid. In fact, none of those are actually true. Joe was just thinking out loud.

That’s the way his brain works. If Fred had stopped to think for a second, he might have said to himself, “Hmm, it sounds like Joe thinks I’m stupid. But that might not be true. In fact, it’s probably not true when I stop to think about it. What else could he have meant? Maybe he is just thinking out loud. Yep, I’m going to go with that.”

This whole internal conversation could happen in a split second, if Fred was in the habit of doing it and an uncomfortable situation could be avoided.

3. Acknowledge what they are saying

Show with your body language that you are listening. This might include nodding your head at the right places, not looking around the room, not fiddling with a cell phone, sitting comfortably but not slouching. When possible tell the other person in your own words what you believe they are saying. This allows you to make sure you have understood them correctly, and lets them hear your take on what they have communicated.

Talking Skills

1. Try to keep irritation out of your voice

Sounding annoyed automatically sets a negative atmosphere for the conversation. In effect you are communicating that:

- The other person has done something wrong.
- You are in some way superior.
- You view them as an errant child.

It can have several effects, none of which are conducive for a productive conversation:

- It can cause the other person to go on the defensive.
- It can cause the other person to become offensive.
- It can suppress further meaningful conversation.
- It removes the sense of having a peer to peer relationship.

Instead of sounding frustrated when you are, it is always better to say in a normal tone, "I feel frustrated." This lets the other person know while maintaining peer status.

2. Be understandable to the other person

This is the opposite of *Understand the other person* under *Listening*. Once again this is a skill to be learned and a habit to be made. It involves saying things in such a way that the other person's first reaction to what you have said is the accurate one. This will be different from person to person. The better you know someone the easier this is to accomplish.

3. Think before you speak

You can always say something. You can't un-say it. This is another verbal skill that pays huge dividends. There are ways to say things that will hurt or anger the other person and ways that will not so much. Rather than saying the first thing that comes to your mind, *think*, and say it in a way that is easy to hear. This thought process does not need to take long. With practice it will be just part of your normal speaking.

4. Speak accurately about your feelings

Rather than say, "That pisses me off." Say what is true: "I'm feeling pissed off about that." The first statement above implies that how you feel is not your own fault. "You just can't help it." This, we already know, is simply not true. The second conveys your true feelings while claiming ownership of and responsibility for them.

5. Learn to use the same types of words and phrases as your partner

Do this to the extent that you do not become (or sound) inauthentic. The more the two of you use similar speech patterns the more easily understood you will be.

Dealing with serious issues or disagreements

1. **Stay rational**

Understanding is the key to solving problems. Rational thinking promotes understanding. Emotional thinking destroys it. While talking about an issue, consciously and continuously work to stay rational and avoid becoming emotional.

2. **Never say something calculated to hurt the other person.**

When we are hurting we want the other person to feel that hurt. It is tempting to say something, frequently something that is not accurate, that will take a dig at a known weak area. This is unfair, undeserved and unproductive.

3. **No sarcasm**

Sarcasm in a fight or argument is saying what is not true for the specific purpose of hurting the other person. Sarcasm is totally off limits. It is a guaranteed deal breaker.

4. **Avoid overt signs of frustration**

This includes sighing, rolling your eyes, moving your head into an “oh, please” position, etc. This communicates that what the other person is saying is pointless, stupid, and a waste of everyone’s time. You are bored out of your skull waiting until they relinquish the floor. Everything word they spew (except for “I’m done talking now.”) is going in one ear and out the other. Note a little sarcasm here? That’s because this is a body language form of sarcasm. There is no cheese at the end of this tunnel.

5. **Avoid the phrase, “I don’t want to talk about it now.”**

This is like putting dog poop on an infection and hoping it will heal. Without communication, the problem isn’t going away. Thinking about it (on both your parts) without the ability to hear how the other really feels only make it worse.

6. **Do not punish**

Punishment is useful for children and necessary for criminals. It has no place in a relationship between peers. Any attempt at punishing such as withholding sex, staying out late, and especially violence, either physical or emotional is always totally destructive to a relationship. In fact my advice to anyone who is experiencing punishment in a relationship is – get out now.

7. **Silent treatment**

Giving the silent treatment is manipulative and childish. It is a passive-aggressive attempt to punish the other person over a long period of time. It is by definition non-productive.

Special Communication Skills and Techniques

1. The art of apologizing

Apologizing is something that is difficult for most people. They are thinking one or more of these:

- I can't apologize or they will know I am a bad person.
- I'm not going to apologize for something I didn't do.
- What I did was right so I'm not going to apologize.
- I can't apologize or they will win.
- Apologizing is a sign of weakness.
- My motto is: Never apologize.

But properly used, apology is one of the most effective skills you can develop. It is also usually the right thing to do.

I first realized how valuable being willing to apologize is about 35 years before this writing. It was in the workplace and involved a co-worker right on the other side of my cubical wall, a very reclusive engineer who almost nobody, certainly not I, knew well. I was really surprised one day when out of nowhere I heard a loud voice saying, "There's that whistling again! It's driving me crazy!" I didn't even realize that I was whistling. I stood up and looked over the wall, sure enough it was Mac.

Now, at that point I could have reacted to anger with anger. I could have said, "Hey what's your problem? I'll whistle if I want to." But I thought about it first and then responded, "I'm sorry, Mac. I didn't know it was bothering you. I'll make sure keep it more quiet going forward."

Mac was floored. He didn't expect a kind response. He then apologized for overreacting. Over the next several months we developed a friendship (which was very rare for Mac). As it turned out Mac was a programming super guru. Who knew? I learned so many things from him. Many of them I still use to this day. The simple decision to think before responding lead to the enrichment of two people's lives.

Apologizing invariably softens a tense situation. It acknowledges that we were human and made a mistake. In 35 years I have yet to have someone think less of me for apologizing. There can even be times when it is prudent to apologize for something that you don't believe was wrong. Being right is unimportant when it comes to improving a relationship. Think about it. Would you rather the other person knows you were right or have a good and rewarding relationship? If it's important enough, they will know the truth about the situation sooner or later. If it's not, then who cares.

2. Couch Time

Couch time is a structured technique for discussing serious issues. My version of it involves the following rules:

- Each person sits in whatever position is comfortable on the opposite side of a couch facing each other.
- Both should acknowledge that the goal of couch time is to improve the relationship and solve existing problems.
- As much as possible, eye contact should be made.
- Each person absolutely has the floor while he/she is talking. No interruptions.

- When they are done making their point, it is the other person's turn.
- When possible part of what they say should repeat what they believe the other person has said.
- Honesty is an absolute must or there is no point to the exercise.
- As much as possible each person should remain rational about what the other person is saying.
- Willingness to acknowledge needs for self-improvement is a big plus.

Couch time provides a way to discuss problems in a way that is most conducive to finding solutions. It is a great equalizer for two people who have differing verbal skills and styles. It structures them into focusing on the issues in a collaborative way.

3. Coffee Time

This doesn't have to actually involve coffee. It does involve finding some amount of time to spend talking every day. It is the kind of thing that becomes a habit. It should be the same place every day and it should be considered the most important thing of the day. It should basically never be skipped, even if you are busy, unless one of you is out of town.

This practice will keep both of you on the same page. It significantly reduces opportunities for disagreements and misunderstandings because whatever is important will come up at coffee. It keeps you more comfortable with each other because you share whatever is important every day and it has never been more than a day since you had meaningful time together..

4. Overriding emotional buttons

Overriding your own emotional buttons is completely within your control. Remember Psychological Truth #1 – No one can make you feel any certain way. With practice you can begin to recognize your buttons and become aware of when you are responding to them. You can then begin to modify the response you have to them by changing your internal conversations about them.

For instance: I had an emotional button about other drivers that would cut in front of me in slow traffic while I was trying to maintain a reasonable distance. My internal conversation was: "That person just did something I wouldn't do (a lie, because I have done it). Now they've been rewarded for doing what's clearly wrong by getting ahead of me. I'm angry. That person is a jerk."

Only that last sentence would make it out of my mouth, but it would serve to put my wife in a confined space with a complainer. At some point she explained to me that she did not like it when I complained like that. I could have responded that the other drivers were inconsiderate and that I couldn't help it if that irritated me, but I knew that was hogwash. So I decided to change my internal conversation to, "That person just did what a lot of drivers do and I am not going to let it interfere with my or my wife's peace of mind."

When I hold that conversation instead of the previous one, my feelings do not change, I do not become angry, I am not stressed, and I do not say things my wife makes herself uncomfortable about.

Odds and Ends

Ten Commandments of a Good Relationship

1. Never be unfaithful in any way.
2. Never talk to others about your lover negatively.
3. Say I love you several times a day.
4. Never scold your lover in public.
5. Don't go to sleep angry, talk it out.
6. Admit promptly when you are wrong.
7. Never lie to your lover.
8. Always say yes to making love.
9. Consistently inform your lover of your whereabouts and schedule.
10. Never keep score.

Ten Recommendations of a Good Relationship

1. Share all financial assets and obligations.
2. Share your whereabouts automatically using the 'Find Friends' app.
3. Bring your lover a card or gift or flowers when they are not expecting it.
4. Call to say, "Just thinking about you."
5. Don't keep phone passwords secret.
6. Don't put yourself in situations where you could be tempted to be unfaithful.
7. Find mutually esoteric things to be romantic about.
8. Touch each other regularly.
9. Kiss at least twice or three times every day.
10. In conversation, take responsibility for your own feelings.

Recommended Reading

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| 1. Your Erroneous Zones – Wayne W. Dyer | ISBN: 978-0061852008 |
| 2. When I Say No I Feel Guilty – Manual J Smith | ISBN: 978-0553263909 |
| 3. A New Guide to Rational Living –
Albert Ellis & Robert A. Harper | ASIN: B000ERLZ5I |