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### Dealing Directly in our Relationships: 21 Tips\*

**There are three “people” in a relationship:** ourselves, our partner, and that invisible third “person:” the couple. When there’s a conflict, we need to be aware of the feelings and needs of (a) ourselves, (b) our partner, and (c) the relationship. In a healthy relationship, our partner will be working on this awareness, too. Sound hard? It is—so first, let’s focus on awareness of ourselves. And remember that life is an ongoing learning process.

The goal of the guidelines below is to create a **safe space** where we feel free to be ourselves, to be intimate, and to grow as individuals and as couples. The more we practice these techniques, the less we find ourselves having conflicts, and we find it easier to resolve them.

1. **Listen to your partner.** I don’t mean, “Do everything they say.” I mean, “Really try to listen and understand when they have a concern.” It can be easier to do this when we realize that **listening to and understanding each other may be more important than changing our behavior** (see number 17 below).
2. **Trust in your partner’s good intentions.** This is hard when our partner has just said something hurtful. People say a lot of things they don’t mean, or that they mean only for that moment, when they’re angry. Couples who wish to improve their relationships care about each other, and at least consciously, **want to behave in a way that is helpful**, even when they are unable.
3. **Conflict can be a good thing.** I’m not talking about violence, either physical or verbal. But have you ever noticed a couple that never fought, and you thought, “What a wonderful relationship they must have”—and then you learned that they had suddenly broken up? Healthy couples sometimes need to blow off steam to resolve conflicts. (See Stephen Mitchell’s book, *Can Love Last?* for more information if you are intellectually inclined). The constructive resolution of conflict helps people feel closer and keep passion alive in long-term relationships. We try to do this in as caring and tactful a way as possible.

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\* This handout applies not only to partners, but also to close friends, family, and colleagues.

4. **Speak from the “I.”** When you have a conflict, try to express your own experience of the problem. Focus on your **emotions and the underlying issues** (e.g., I’m afraid you’ll leave me”), rather than “the plot” (Who said What and When.) Avoid using the word “You” in describing your experience (it sounds like an accusation). Don’t bring in third-part communications (e.g., “My therapist said such- and-such about you”). We each have our own experience of what happens. It doesn’t help to focus on who is “right” or who “started it.” We don’t have to defend our experience.
  - a. *Healthy communication:* “It sounded to *me* like you were putting *me* down. *I* thought you were telling *me* I was stupid, and that made *me* feel angry and hurt.”
  - b. *Unhealthy communication:* “*You* told me I don’t know how to read maps, then *you* told me that was the wrong direction, and the gas station was on the right—not the left—and *you* said, ‘Why didn’t you bring bottled water.’ *You* think I’m stupid! Well, I don’t care what *you* think!”
5. **Don’t Compare.** If you compare your partner’s behavior with others’, you’re playing “two against one.” Don’t say, for example, “So-and-so’s wife does all the laundry; why can’t you?”
6. **Call a “time out” if things seem to be escalating.** If you notice that one or both of you are getting more and more angry and excited, ask for a “time out.” Try to say that you want to work this out, and try to give a time frame to come back to the issue—e.g., “this afternoon”—to reduce the chance of the other person’s feeling rejected. Be sure to say, “*I*” need a time out; not “*you*” or “*we*” need a time out, even if you believe that they are the one who really needs it.
7. **Don’t “sweep it under the rug.”** Couples lose their temper—which is fine from time to time. If one or both of you are just temporarily stressed out, you may not need to discuss the verbal “scuffle.” But if there is stress between the two of you because of some unresolved issue, you must discuss it. Don’t avoid it just because you don’t want to “make waves,” because “everything’s fine now”—or because you had “makeup sex” and feel great now. The problem will not go away on its own. Arrange for a time to talk about it when you’re not “fired up.”
8. **Don’t “hit below the belt.”** If you know your partner has a “sore spot” (in the example in 4b above, they’re worried about their intelligence), avoid lashing out at them with an insult that will “hit the spot.” Insults and put-downs are unacceptable, even in the guise of supposedly constructive criticism (e.g., “I’m telling you this for your own good”).
9. **Never use physical threats or actual violence.** When this happens, it is a sign that you need professional counseling to resolve the problem.
10. **Only one person gets to “lose it” at a time.** If we both lose it, and neither one of us comes back to reality to stop an unhealthy fight, the quarrel will escalate. We may need to contain our anger (or take a time-out)—at least for the moment.

11. **Stick to one issue at a time.** It's tempting, when we're upset, to bring up other conflicts as we think about them, but it's hard enough to resolve one conflict without bringing up others.
12. **You're not a mind-reader.** Don't assume your partner is thinking or feeling something "bad" about you—**check it out.**
13. **Talk about it in person.** When we're upset, we may wish to resolve a conflict right away, via telephone, text, or e-mail. When we don't talk in person, however, we don't get a chance to see how our partner is reacting. Ninety per cent of our communication is non-verbal. E-mails and texts make it easy to "dump" on the other person, especially when we don't carefully read what we write, and think about the potential effect on the other person, before we send them. (Some couples, however, find that e-mails give them space to think before responding, which might not be the case for them in person.)
14. **Don't "analyze" your partner** (that's my job!). We may, out of genuine caring or a desire to avoid our own issues, wish to suggest to our partners how unresolved issues from the past are affecting them in the present and influencing their feelings in the conflict. Avoid this temptation. Our job is to focus on *our* emotions and understanding *our partner's*. If, after things have calmed down, our partners want our feedback, we can offer it.
15. **Don't go to bed angry.** It's lonely sleeping in a bed by yourself, or feeling cut off from someone you care about. See if you can put your anger and hurt "on the shelf," and agree that you'll try to work it out tomorrow.
16. **Be willing to compromise.** Just like in business, we need to be able to negotiate in our relationships (although our close relationship negotiations may be more honest and open than a business deal). Not every situation can be "win-win." Couples can't divide everything "50-50." One person may do the chores; the other may offer more emotional support. One partner may be more comfortable with discussing conflict; the other may need more time to "simmer down."
17. **Don't try to "change" your mate.** We need to learn to accept our partners—*and ourselves*—more and more. This is a lifelong process. The goal of conflict resolution is to understand each other better. It is more important that your partner understands how you feel about a problem than that they change their behavior (there are exceptions to this, such as abuse or neglect). Often, however, when couples truly emphasize, they find that behavior does start to change.
18. **We Have Different "Love Languages."** Some of us show through saying loving things or showing affection; others, through actions, such as doing a special chore or giving a gift. You may need to train your partner to share love in ways you need, or translate their action into your favored form of expression. (See Chapman and Summers's book for more information.)

- 19. Don't lose your sense of humor.** Have you ever been in the middle of a knock-down, drag-out fight, and you just burst out laughing? This is a kind of grace, which helps us gain a sense of perspective. Sense of humor is one of the most powerful “glues” that keep people together. (Note: this is about **laughing with**, rather than **at**, your partner.)
- 20. Nourish your relationship.** We need to make time for care of ourselves, our partner, and the relationship—time to relax, be intimate, have fun. Schedule daily or weekly “check-ins” to talk about whatever couples issues arise, and combine the check-in with a “date night” dinner or other pleasurable activity. No matter how busy you are, make nourishing your relationship a priority.
- 21. Nobody's perfect.** As human beings, we “fail” constantly, and continually learn from our mistakes. No one can follow the above guidelines all the time—sometimes we even need to get *into* a mess before we can get *out* of it (see Mitchell). What's important is that we try—that we work on our relationships with others and with ourselves--by trying better to understand ourselves, each other, and the third “person” in the relationship—the couple.

Here's a **Reflection Exercise** I use in couples counseling to increase empathy (see Harville Hendrix's book, *Getting the Love you Want*, for more information):

- a. One member of the couple describes their emotional experience of the conflict, focusing on their emotions, and speaking from the “I.”
- b. The partner puts their own experience on the shelf so they can listen while putting themselves in the member's shoes.
- c. The partner reflects back what they have heard from the member, until the member feels understood.
- d. Repeat the process with the partner. Now see if there's a slight shift in understanding.

### **For Single Folks Who Don't Want to Be:**

There's nothing “wrong” with being single. Some people are happier that way, for a period of time, or for their entire lives. This can be a great opportunity to get to know ourselves, and learn to treat ourselves better (this can happen through our close relationships, as well). And it sure beats being in an unhealthy relationship. But for those of you who don't want to be single, consider this: Your future partner may be right under your nose.

Many of us have a checklist of criteria that prospective partners must meet for us to consider them “relationship material.” One obstacle to finding a partner is the difference between our expectations of who our future mate “should” be and what we actually need from a partner. This is especially true with physical attraction. When I ask people whether a friend could make a good partner, I often hear that although they love this person, there's no “chemistry.” But when we're truly open to being close to someone—which can feel vulnerable for all of us—attraction can develop where it is least expected....

**For Further Reading:**

Chapman, G., & Summers, A. (2015). *The five love languages*. Nashville: Lifeway.

Hendrix, H. (2019). *Getting the love you want: A guide for couples*. Irvine, CA: Griffin.

Mitchell, S. (2002). *Can Love Last?* New York: Norton.