

## **KEY INGREDIENTS IN CREATING AND MAINTAINING A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH A PARTNER**

A healthy relationship with a partner can be a difficult proposition. It takes an investment of time, energy, and emotion and a commitment to work at your relationship in an ongoing fashion. In reality, BOTH partners need to be willing to make this a priority if it is actually going to happen. Punishing, disrespectful, and explosive anger always create hurt, resentment, mistrust, and emotional distance in intimate relationships. Learning to handle anger more effectively, since it is impossible to avoid, is a critical step to having and maintaining a healthy relationship. Below are some ideas about how to make your relationship more satisfying and fulfilling in other ways as well. Use this section to identify additional places where you can commit to do some things differently to improve your relationship and your life with one another.

### **PRIOR TO ENTERING A RELATIONSHIP (OR AT ANY POINT, IF NECESSARY)**

#### **DEVELOP SELF-KNOWLEDGE, SELF-AWARENESS, AND SELF-ESTEEM TO BE READY AS AN INDIVIDUAL TO BE INVOLVED IN A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP**

- Intimacy is not just a matter of “feeling close” to someone else; rather, true intimacy is impossible without first having a solid sense of your own identity, worth, and reality
- Understand how you have become the person you are today and how who you are affects your relationship with a partner
  - ...be clear about the impact of your family of origin and your childhood experiences on who you are as a person and how you view others and the world around you
  - ...think about how your parents’ relationship with each other and their relationships with you and your siblings have affected the way that you look at yourself and your relationship with a partner in the present
- Know yourself and both your strengths and your shortcomings
  - ...acknowledge them openly to yourself and to your partner in your relationship with them
- Know and take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, wants, needs, actions, **and inaction**
  - ...be aware of your “dark side” and how it can affect your life and your relationship with a partner (we all have it; be willing to admit this to yourself)
  - ...become aware of and be open about your “hidden” and “unspoken” expectations of a partner
- Don’t compromise critical aspects of who you want and know yourself to be in order to be in a relationship with another person (e.g. your values, your morality, your integrity)
- Stay open to continuing to learn more about yourself as an individual through the relationship with your partner
  - ...partners can be great “teachers:” they live with us, see us at our best and worst, and probably know us as well as (if not better than) anyone else in our lives
  - ...plan to use their “expertise” about you to help you heal, change, and grow as a person
  - ...don’t stop learning about yourself: hopefully, learning more about yourself is a lifelong process

#### **BE CLEAR WITH YOURSELF AND WITH A PROSPECTIVE (OR CURRENT) PARTNER ABOUT WHAT YOU ARE ACTUALLY LOOKING FOR IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH ANOTHER PERSON**

- Avoid falling in the trap of looking only for and expecting the “magic” and “chemistry” that is so much a part of the “infatuation phase” of a relationship (that early time in the

relationship when you are “head over heels” in love and can’t stop thinking about and wanting to be with the other person). It doesn’t last and your connection needs to be built on something significantly more substantive if your relationship is to become a mature and intimate adult connection with a partner.

- Develop two lists for yourself to help you identify the qualities most important to you in a partner
  - ...A list of **“MUST HAVES”** which are absolutely critical, in your mind, to the success of your relationship (these are the “deal-breakers” for you in a relationship)
    - ...e.g. it might be something that some people would consider relatively “trivial” like being a nonsmoker or a dog lover or it could include qualities that most people would consider to be very important like “being honest and truthful,” “being a good listener,” “wanting to have children,” or “being respectful”
  - ...A list of **“WOULD LIKES”** which are qualities that are preferable in a partner but that are not absolutely necessary to you
    - e.g. someone who “likes to travel and see new places,” “enjoys the arts and theater,” “likes being out in nature,” or “is committed to working out and staying physically fit”
- Watch out for being too rigid and perfectionistic and having unrealistically high expectations that no one could possibly live up to
  - ...You’re not likely to find a partner if you do this

## **ONCE YOU ARE INVOLVED IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH A PARTNER**

### **DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN A SPIRIT OF INTEGRITY, TRUST, COMMITMENT AND LOVE**

- Be honest with yourself and your partner (e.g. what is going on in your life; your thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs; how you feel about yourself and your relationship)
  - ...avoid “lies of commission” (e.g. being overtly dishonest) or “lies of omission” (e.g. not sharing important information that you should be sharing with your partner)
- Be faithful to your partner emotionally and sexually
  - ...an affair is a significant betrayal of the trust and the emotional bond you have with your partner
  - ...in addition, watch out for “affairs” with TV watching, work, playing video games, participating in sports activities, surfing the internet, staring at your cell phone or tablet, alcohol or drug use, gambling, and the like where you (and your life) become “consumed” by an activity or substance that effectively and essentially removes you from time and emotional connection with a partner
- Be a trustworthy person yourself
  - ...work to truly “be there” for your partner in your relationship and to follow through with what you say you will do (and what you say you will not do)
- Make the conscious decision to trust your partner unless they do something to actually violate your trust
  - ...view and treat your partner as a friend and a supporter, not an enemy or adversary
- Partners in a healthy relationship can tolerate, and even accept, fairly large differences if they basically accept and value one another

- Be loving and consistent in your attitudes and behaviors with your partner in your daily lives
  - ...keep in mind that **“LOVE IS A CHOICE”** which you either make or do not make in your daily life with your partner (these are the decisions you make that demonstrate your love for the other person)
    - ...love is NOT just that overwhelming emotional state that is often associated with the infatuation phase of a new relationship
  - ...also remember that **“LOVE IS AN ACTION VERB”** and actually involves how you think about and what you do with one another
    - ...i.e. how you treat each other from moment to moment in your lives together
  - ...stay aware that people have different ways that they experience love from their partner (e.g. verbal expressions of love, physical affection, making efforts to connect and spend time with one another, doing tangible and practical things for the other person)
    - ...get to know what you need in order to feel loved and get to know what your partner needs in order to feel loved
      - ...they are often not the same
- Follow through with what you say you will do and with what you say you will not do
  - ...make and keep your commitments (large and small) with one another
- Acknowledge your mistakes and apologize and make amends whenever necessary
- Understand and accept the natural “ebb and flow” in your relationship
  - ...keep in mind that you won’t feel “deeply connected” and “deeply in love” during every moment of your life together (you will have less time and connection with one another during certain times in your life, e.g. when you have very young children, when your children’s schedules are busy, when you are taking on a new challenge [e.g. going back to school, starting a new job, caring for aging parents])
    - ...work hard to accept, with good humor, your partner’s occasional fatigue, forgetfulness, moodiness, thoughtlessness, “crazyness,” and mistakes (remember that we are all human and fail to “measure up” at times)
    - ...learn to laugh in a non-shaming way at your own and your partner’s idiosyncrasies, foibles, shortcomings, and annoying habits
- Focus more on “giving love” than on “getting love” with your partner
  - ...live by the “Golden Rule:” treat your partner the way you want to be treated by them

### **MAINTAIN CLEAR AND HEALTHY BOUNDARIES TO PROMOTE TOLERANCE, ACCEPTANCE, AND RESPECT**

- Openly recognize, discuss, respect, appreciate, and even delight in your partner’s differences, changes, and personal growth throughout your relationship
  - ...don’t expect that your partner should “always stay the same” in your relationship together
- Stay aware of and intervene in your desire to control who you think your partner should be and stay aware of your expectations in the relationship and realize that they may not come to pass (e.g. trying to “force” change in the other person)
  - ...honestly acknowledge your desire to control when it does surface
  - ...lead by example, not by dictating, commanding, “teaching,” or lecturing the other person
- Be willing to detach in a healthy way at times from your partner’s issues, problems, moods, and feelings to avoid becoming codependent or controlling
  - ...avoid trying to “fix” your partner or coming up with “solutions” for them especially if they have not requested these “solutions”
  - ...be clear that he or she is a separate person from you, not simply an extension of who you are

- Be aware of, talk about, and intervene in ineffective and destructive “patterns” and “dances” that you play out in your relationship (e.g. regarding household chores, finances, and parenting)
- Respect your partner’s privacy
  - ...e.g. avoid reading diaries and journals, checking e-mail, text, and phone records, or listening in on phone calls without your partner’s knowledge or permission

## **DEVELOP AND USE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS TO PROMOTE EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS AND CONNECTION**

- Work to understand the differences in the ways men and women are socialized to view the world and communicate with others
  - ...in general, men tend to use communication to establish status and independence and to share their knowledge and expertise; women tend to use communication as a means to emotionally connect with other people (including their partner)
  - ...in general, men tend to offer solutions to problems and use communication to establish status and independence; women tend to listen and express sympathy and empathy in order to make an emotional connection with another person
  - ...these styles are not “right” or “wrong;” they are just there!
  - ...the challenge is to adapt your own communication style in your own relationship; this means understanding this socialization process and changing some of what you do with each other; both sexes need to adapt and change some of what you have learned
- Make time to talk with your partner and actually set aside regular times to connect (be proactive and planful about doing this)
  - ...find specific times to connect (e.g. at the end of the day; on the weekends)
  - ...turn off the TV and stay away from your cell phone, your tablet and the computer at those times
- Stay genuinely curious about your partner, who they are, and their way of looking at the world
  - ...don’t make the assumption that you know “everything there is to know” about that other person and thus you have nothing more to learn
    - ...e.g. their feelings, thoughts, wants, needs, opinions, intentions, motives, and actions
  - ...ask open-ended questions, really listen to how they respond, and make it a part of your understanding about who they are and how they see the world
- Practice active listening and paraphrasing skills to better understand each others’ thoughts, feelings, and perspectives
- Allow yourself to experience, identify, and assertively share all the emotions you experience
- Express your wants and needs directly and respectfully without the expectation that the other person will necessarily meet them in exactly the way that you have in mind
- Work hard to make interesting conversation with your partner
- Check out and clarify your assumptions with one another
  - ...don’t expect that you or your partner should be able to “mind read” each other, no matter how long you have been together
- Think about and tell your partner what you like, appreciate, and value about them
  - ...communicating “positives” to one another is a critical part of building and maintaining intimacy: **DO THIS A LOT!**
  - ...couples researcher John Gottman indicates that “happy” couples who feel good about their relationships say five times more positive than negative statements to one another
- Offer encouragement to your partner about who they are, what they do, and who they want to become through your words (“*I love you,*” compliments) and your actions (remembering

special days, offering help and small courtesies without being asked, being an active participant in the relationship and in your household)

...recognize that change is a “given” (hopefully) in your partner, in you, and in your relationship as the years go by in your time together

- Listen to your partner’s feedback and reactions to you and use what you hear as a helpful “reality test” in the way that you look at yourself, your relationship, and the world around you  
...use your partner as a “teacher:” they probably know you better than anyone else in your life
- Stay current in sharing your hurts and frustrations with your partner so you don’t allow resentment and bitterness to build up and poison your relationship
- Share your vulnerabilities in a mutual way to that you do not take on a “teacher-pupil” or “mentor-student” relationship with your partner

### **DEVELOP AND USE EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE SAFETY, COOPERATION, AND DECISION-MAKING**

- Identify, talk openly, and be flexible about the “rules” in your relationship  
...every relationship has “rules” (spoken or unspoken) that we often bring into our time together from earlier life experiences: verbalize them with each other!  
...renegotiate these “rules” when necessary rather than simply expecting to live by the rules you bring into the relationship and expecting your partner to do the same
- Express your anger directly but moderate the intensity of the anger you experience with one another  
...learn to take respectful time-outs when your anger is escalating toward a power struggle, punishing or explosive behavior, or an unproductive outcome  
...research by John Gottman indicates that couples in long-term, satisfying, and healthy relationships work to decrease the intensity of their anger with one another
- Be aware of and intervene in your negative, hostile, cynical, vengeful, or competitive self-talk
- Be clear about what disrespectful and abusive behavior is and don’t engage in it  
...decide and talk about what behaviors are “okay” and what behaviors are “not okay” when anger arises and conflict occurs between the two of you
- Change your basic goal in conflict resolution from idea that “*we have to agree with each other*” to the idea that “*we need to truly understand each other’s position and perspective*”
- Develop and use practical guidelines for addressing and resolving conflicts (e.g. picking an appropriate time and place, sticking to one issue at a time, allowing each of you uninterrupted time to speak)
- Work hard to understand the “meaning” or “purpose” behind your own and your partner’s perspective on any important issue that comes between you and communicate this underlying message to each other
- Learn to negotiate and compromise with one another in order to get at least some of what you want
- Learn to “agree to disagree” at times  
...you can actually do this with most of the things you argue about
- Begin to realize that many, if not most, of your conflicts with your partner may never be completely resolved (69% in a long-term relationship, according to researcher John Gottman) and that this is, in fact, “okay” and “normal”
- Learn to accept “no’s” from your partner and limits your partner sets with you without over-reacting to this happening

- Learn to forgive your partner for mistakes they make and actively work toward an empathetic and compassionate attitude with one another  
...forgiving is helpful for you and the relationship

### **PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT FOR ONE ANOTHER TO PROMOTE NURTURANCE**

- Work hard to be affirming, validating, and encouraging in good and bad times during your lives together
- Know, accept, share, and support your partner's vision for themselves  
...attempt to help your partner create and become who they want to be (including family, educational, career, and other aspects of their life) vs. what you think they should be or want them to be for you
- Actively look for specific ways you can give to your partner and the relationship  
...the long-term health of a relationship depends on a fairly equal balance of giving and receiving and a feeling of equal sacrifices and rewards  
...although partners may bring and give different things to a relationship and, for periods of time, one partner may receive more support or attention than the other (e.g. when one person loses a job or has a friend or relative who is ill)

### **BUILD FUN AND PLAY INTO YOUR RELATIONSHIP**

- Let your spontaneous and fun-loving "inner child" connect with your partner's "inner child" at times  
...having child-like fun and involvement and maintaining an attitude of "light-heartedness" with one another (similar to the way many people often relate to children or pets)
- Nurture your own and your partner's senses of humor
- Take plenty of time to laugh together about your own and life's "weirdness"
- Use playful banter, affectionate teasing, and "pet names" into your time together  
...e.g. "sweet pea," "honey bunch," "dew melon"
- Avoid the trap of thinking that "*being an real adult means that you have to act 'stiff,' 'serious,' and somber at all times*"  
...allow yourselves to act "silly" and "goofy" with one another when it feels right for both of you
- Watch out for using sarcasm as a substitute for being honest about your anger, frustration, and resentment with one another
- Learn to maintain your sense of humor and the ability to laugh with one another even in the worst of times

### **DEVELOP AND SHARE A VISION FOR YOURSELVES IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP**

- Set common mutually-agreed-upon goals for yourselves and your relationship that reflect a sense of purpose and solidarity in your relationship together  
...e.g. regarding whether or not to have children, how to handle your finances, buying and owning a home, taking vacations, and planning your retirement
- Develop couple and family rituals and traditions that celebrate the importance and "specialness" of your relationship  
...rituals help us make and keep emotional connection and communicate a sense of trust and safety in the relationship  
...rituals create predictability and intentionality in our lives together

...rituals can assist us in staying connected despite our differences and conflicts

...e.g. reading the newspaper together on weekend mornings; attending religious services and kids' activities together; Saturday or Sunday brunches or dinners; anniversary and birthday celebrations; celebrating your relationship on Valentine's Day; special holiday activities (e.g. looking at the lights at Christmas); going to movies, plays, or sporting events you both enjoy; sharing hello and goodbye hugs and kisses; drinking a glass of iced tea or wine in the back yard or in your living room at the end of a long day; exercising at a gym together

- Develop a sense of mission or purpose about something (e.g. a "cause") outside your relationship which means working together to make the world a better place  
...e.g. working for a political candidate or party; serving meals at a homeless shelter; building a "Habitat for Humanity" home; joining a mission group going to another country to provide services for the people there; attending a Bible study for couples at your church; working with a neighborhood group to improve something in your community

### **STRIVE FOR EQUALITY IN FAMILY DECISION-MAKING AND TASKS**

- Work hard to make important family decisions together  
...consult each other and value your partner's input  
...learn to be flexible and adapt to your partner's needs at times
- Talk about and make conscious choices about having children, career issues, where you will live, what vehicles you will purchase, how household and parenting chores will be divided, how you will handle your finances, how you will spend your vacations, how you will spend time with extended family, and other important areas in your life together

### **BUILD ROMANCE INTO YOUR RELATIONSHIP**

- Look for ways to rekindle your passion for one another that you felt when you first met  
...e.g. flowers; cards, letters, and notes that share your appreciation and love for one another; candlelight dinners; walking or biking together in nature; day trips or weekends away as a couple; vacations for just the two of you
- Think back about and work to keep in mind what attracted you to your partner when you first got together and about the special times you have had with one another in the past (and how you have been romantic with one another at those times)

### **DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN PHYSICAL AFFECTION IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP**

- Share non-sexual and nurturing physical affection regularly (infants can actually die without physical touch)  
...e.g. sharing hugs and kisses, holding hands when you are walking together, sitting close to each other on the couch, "cuddling" time in bed before you fall asleep and when you awaken or at other times
- Connect through mutually-satisfying and non-coercive sensual and sexual involvement  
...e.g. back rubs, foot rubs, and other massage; spending time together in the sauna, whirlpool, or shower; being sexually intimate with one another
- Be open and talk about what feels good in your physical relationship together and what your "wants" are regarding affection and sexuality



- Sex is part of intimacy in a partner relationship but keep in mind that there are other types of intimacy as well and that many men and women may have very different intimacy needs, wants, and expectations

### **SPEND TIME TOGETHER**

- Look for opportunities to emotionally connect during the course of your day and week  
...e.g. using phone calls, e-mails, and text messages to one another to say hello and check in at times during the day; going out to lunch occasionally; going to bed together at night at least some of the time during the week; attending church together; doing grocery shopping and other mundane tasks together at times; eating dinner together; taking occasional days off together
- Set aside regular time to talk about and plan for what will be happening in terms of activities as a couple (e.g. “date nights”) and as a family
- Relax together at times when nothing needs to be done or accomplished  
...e.g. going to a favorite coffee shop or reading the newspaper together on Saturday or Sunday mornings

### **TAKE EMOTIONAL RISKS IN YOUR ACTIVITIES TOGETHER**

- Take the initiative to try new and different experiences in your life  
...overcome your own inertia, laziness, and insecurity and don’t stay stuck in only doing the activities you know, like, and feel comfortable with
- Be open to and get involved with your partner’s interests and friends

### **SPEND TIME APART**

- Avoid molding yourself around your partner and their interests, activities, and friends and thus giving up who you are or expecting that your partner will do this for you
- Maintain your own unique and separate identity in the context of a close and intimate relationship with your partner
- Take time for yourself and with your own friends  
...your partner doesn’t have to like all your friends and relatives and you don’t have to like all the people in their lives (these people can still be important to each one of you, however)
- Develop your own hobbies, interests, and recreational activities  
...what you bring to your relationship from outside people and experiences can add zest, interest, and spirit to your life together

### **WORK TOGETHER AS A TEAM IN PARENTING (IF YOU HAVE CHILDREN)**

- Realize how your current parenting style is affected by how you were raised in your family of origin by your own parents or caretakers
- Make conscious decisions about how many children you will have and when they will be born  
...if possible, develop your relationship with one another before you even decide to have children
- Talk openly with your partner about how you want to parent and discuss why you feel the way that you do about your parenting style  
...and listen and be open to your partner’s perspective on child-rearing
- Work together in making decisions that affect your children  
...e.g. strategize together about discipline, consequences, and expectations



- Attend a parenting class (together or alone) to learn more about how to be an effective, respectful, and loving parent

### **SEEK HELP AND ASSISTANCE FROM OUTSIDE AND ACTIVELY USE IT WHEN YOU NEED TO DO SO**

- Read books, talk with friends and relatives, and become involved with support groups, workshops, or a therapist when you feel “stuck,” adrift, or disconnected in your relationship with one another
- Be open to others’ ideas and suggestions and make them a part of your relationship whenever appropriate

In the end, being a partner in a healthy relationship means being a good friend, or even a “best friend,” for that person with whom you have decided to share your life. And this means being that friend to them through the good times, the bad times, and even the doldrums of your everyday living together.

Both difficult and “boring“ times are a given in your individual lives and in your relationship with a partner. Disagreement and conflict are always a part of an intimate relationship. The bedrock to effectively moving through those boring or difficult times or the conflict that will inevitably arise between the two of you involves maintaining warmth, trust, positive regard, ongoing respect, and genuine and mature love for that other person, no matter what is going on in your life, in your partner’s life, or in your relationship with one another.

Differences between you and your partner, many of which will probably never be completely resolved, become much less important (and you will likely feel much less bitterness and resentment) when you are able to maintain this way of looking at the person with whom you have chosen to spend your life.