

## **7 Habits of Highly Successful Relationships**

Pragmatic advice to be taken with a grain of salt (and/or tequila & lime)

“Some of the biggest challenges in relationships come from the fact that most people enter a relationship in order to get something: they’re trying to find someone who’s going to make them feel good. In reality, the only way a relationship will last is if you see your relationship as a place that you go to give, and not a place that you go to take.”

-Anthony Robbins

We have long known that everyone is unique in various ways. However, there are several key features beneficial to our overall satisfaction in life, the central of these being “rich and satisfying social relationships” (Ben-Shahar, 2007). We have Biology to thank for our natural tendency to seek out romantic relationships. Because of it, each of us is born with an innate drive to love, whether it be monogamous or polygamous, conservative or (...dare I say) promiscuous. Style and technique may vary, but following are some general, yet comprehensive, principles I have compiled for creating and maintaining a successful romantic relationship.

Keeping in mind that each person is distinctively different, I must acknowledge each relationship forms a combination of complexities and uniqueness. While some of the tips that follow may seem blatant, the practice of these obvious’ behaviors are often disregarded and/or overlooked in relationships. This how-to guide was created with the intentions of sparking increased self awareness and personal responsibility. Practice incorporating the principles that seem applicable to your relationship(s), and keep others in mind for the future.

**Habit #1: *A positive disposition makes a powerful difference.***

“Most of the shadows of this life are caused by standing in one's own sunshine.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Are you a glass is half full kind of person, or do you prefer seeing the glass as half empty? Although it may sound cliché, I can tell you from personal experience that pessimism often is the easiest disposition to resign ones self to. However, a relationship implies a commitment to ‘working at it’, and although a cynical outlook may come natural and effortlessly to you, it usually is the more problematic path to take. In fact, long-term studies of dating couples revealed that optimism can be a critical factor in determining a relationship’s eventual success. *Both* the optimists studied and their partners experienced greater relationship satisfaction due to the perceived support that optimism entails. Conflicts were resolved more constructively by *both* partners, and in a follow-up one year later, men’s optimism predicted relationship status (Sruvastava, 2006). It appears to be the feelings of perceived support as well as cooperative problem solving, both side effects of optimism, which in turn promote a variety of beneficial processes in romantic relationships (Assad, 2007). It’s widely accepted that controlling destructive mood swings and negative attitudes can be quite difficult, however it is *not* impossible. Take active control measures to ensure that the next time your boss is bitchy or your car is rear-ended, you do not end up relaying that negativity toward your partner. A list of potential de-stressors is essential in these situations. A spa visit with your favorite masseuse, guilty pleasures such as sweets or maybe just a phone call to your friend who lets you vent can help kick a sour mood.

**Habit #2: *Make reasonable sacrifices for the right reasons.***

A “No” uttered from deepest conviction is better and greater than a  
“Yes” merely uttered to please, or what is worse, to avoid trouble.  
—Mahatma Gandhi

Many people, at some point or another, have been guilty of acquiring a victim mentality. This can be the result of the emotions associated with making the wrong kind of sacrifices in a relationship. Bona fide altruism is a scarcity in our society, however many people do not realize this until they learn from experience. So how do you know if you’re making the right kinds of sacrifices? A 2005 study on sacrifices broke sacrifice down into two categories: approach motives and avoidance motives. Situations of giving selflessly to a romantic partner are often pitted against being “true” to our own wants and desires. “Approach motives” focus on attaining positive outcomes, such as happiness for your partner or kicking up intimacy a notch, while “avoidance motives” concentrate on dodging negative outcomes, such as a fight, vocal disapproval, or even a partner losing interest in the relationship. In the study, “Approach motives” produced positive associations between personal well-being and relationship quality, while “avoidance motives” created negative associations with personal well-being and relationship quality, and in time became quite detrimental to the maintenance of relationships (Impett, 2005). Renouncing something essential to your happiness can undermine the relationship as you attempt to blur the line between ‘has to’ and ‘wants to’ (Ben-Shahar, 2007).

**Habit #3: *Create shared rituals to strengthen your bond.***

"Rituals anchor us to a center while freeing us to move on and confront the everlasting unpredictability of life. The paradox of ritual patterns and sacred habits is that they simultaneously serve as solid footing and springboard, providing a stable dynamic in our lives."

-Robert Fulgham

Do you and your partner have shared rituals? If not, you may want to consider adopting a couple. Rituals serve as structured sequences of symbolic communication acts that 'pay homage' to something sacred like a relationship, person, group, or institution. Rituals, by nature, are reoccurring and recreated social and relational acts; they have significance outside the activity itself and they give both members a joint history while establishing the groundwork for the future of the relationship (Bruess, 2002). Some examples of rituals can be a date night each week, celebrations at a particular restaurant, even something as simple as a nightly routine of one partner washing the dishes while the other dries. Rituals serve as powerful connecting tools in developing and existing romantic relationships. Creating rituals allows you and your partner to construct a communicative 'culture of two,' as well as helping to cement commitment (Bruess, 2002). Rituals provide escape from stress, pleasure, and recreation. They can also initiate togetherness, as they bring couples closer together and provide time to be spent together (Bruess, 1999).

**Habit #4: *Find constructive methods of dealing with conflict.***

All married couples should learn the art of battle as they should learn the art of making love.

Good battle is objective and honest--never vicious or cruel. Good battle is healthy and constructive, and brings to a marriage the principle of equal partnership.

-Ann Landers

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of every relationship, no matter how close to perfect your relationship may be. Good problem solving skills are crucial to maintaining a positive rapport between partners, and have been linked in numerous studies to the future success of the relationship. In a study examining the key relationship dynamics (communication, conflict and commitment), negative interactions between partners were associated with a decrease in relationship quality and an increase in divorce/break-up potential. Even withdrawals from conflict situations in a relationship were associated with an increase in negativity and an overall decrease in cooperative connections. Research on married couples also indicates that how couples argue is more correlated with divorce rates than the actual content of their argument (Stanley, 2002). If you find yourself in a conflict-prone relationship, try working with several problem solving strategies to see which work best for you. It is sure to take time to improve conflict communications skills, however the end results will make the effort worthwhile.

**Habit #5: Increase the amount of positive communication you employ.**

I can live for two months on a good compliment.

~Mark Twain

Very few people in existence can not appreciate words of affirmation from a significant other. In fact, both giving and getting compliments often can brighten one's day; they can even go so far as to completely change his or her mood. Despite this, however, in some relationships, complementary communication remains deprived. Recent research suggests that compliments and/or complementary behaviors have a

positive influence on overall relational satisfaction in both men and women. These complementary behaviors have a positive affect on both partners, the giver as well as the receiver (Doohan, 2004). This sort of active involvement in a relationship indicates the importance of cultivating the one chosen relationship instead of working endlessly to find that one right person (Ben-Shahar, 2007).

**Habit #6: Openness & honesty are essential in any successful relationship.**

‘We all operate in two contrasting modes, which might be called open and closed. The open mode is more relaxed, more receptive, more exploratory, more democratic, more playful and more humorous. The closed mode is the tighter, more rigid, more hierarchical, more tunnel-visioned. Most people, unfortunately spend most of their time in the closed mode.’

-John Cleese

Openness and honesty often manifests in various forms in relationships. There are actually a few valid justifications for not exposing every detail of your life to your partner; however, those exceptions are rare and often taken advantage of. On the whole in a relationship, openness and honesty are positive tools for communication and establishing connection in a relationship. While novelty can fade into familiarity during the course of a relationship, familiarity is not as damaging as it is often stigmatized. Familiarity can lead to an initial decrease in physical excitement, yet growing very familiar with your partner can actually lead to higher levels of intimacy, and in turn, deeper love and better sex (Ben-Shahar, 2007). Research also indicates a higher level of self disclosure in a relationship is positively correlated with satisfaction, love, and commitment; key variables indicative of overall relationship quality (Sprecher, 2004).

Therefore, after moving beyond the honeymoon stages, a relationship has experienced just the beginning of an exciting adventure in intimacy and love.

**Habit #7: *Establishing a mutual support system with your partner is a must.***

Most of us, swimming against the tides of trouble the world knows nothing about, need only a bit of praise or encouragement - and we will make the goal.

-Jerome Fleishman

The importance of a supportive partner is not a relational aspect to be overlooked, despite its placement on this list. In fact, research indicates greater support and decreased conflict have both been found to be necessary to produce a satisfactory relationship. Partner support can lead to more *productive* conflict which in turn may boost relational satisfaction. Support that reflects being cared for is the strongest independent indicator of relationship satisfaction. This suggests that couples that are more emotionally supportive to each other can improve relationship quality (Cramer, 2006). Practicing emotional support with your partner is invaluable in the process of developing a satisfying relationship. Work on increasing various types of vocalizations of support and evaluate your partner's responses. You are bound to find reciprocity and an overall increase in relationship quality.

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