

RELATIONSHIPS

Satisfying and fulfilling relationships are sought after by the vast majority of people. So why does it seem so difficult sometimes to achieve this? Research tells us that happiness depends to some extent on having good quality relationships, yet divorce rates are rising and the average number and duration of marriages is falling.

Whether you believe that your current relationship is particularly unfulfilling or generally pretty good, you can always improve its quality by making some (often small) changes. There is an extensive body of research investigating the factors that contribute to satisfying relationships, as well as what factors make a relationship more likely to fail. The following list of suggestions incorporates beliefs, skills and concepts that have been taken from that research. Whilst they are written with intimate relationships in mind, many of the strategies can be applied to friendships and family relationships as well.

- 1. Long-term, mutually fulfilling relationships don't happen easily or without effort** – Many of our beliefs about relationships and romance have elements of movie or fairy-tale ideas such as being “soul-mates”. And sometimes we look at relationships of people around us and they seem near-perfect, and we might think, “They are lucky to be so happy and so close”. Fulfilling relationships have little to do with luck and more to do with a willingness to make the relationship a priority and to make a focused effort.
- 2. A relationship starts with yourself** – Ensure you are satisfied with who you are as an individual, and with other aspects of your life (e.g. work). A relationship is more likely to be successful if it consists of two, complete individuals, compared to relationships in which one partner is relying on the relationship to make themselves “whole”.
- 3. Communicate** – There is no doubt that effective communication is a key to maintaining a satisfying relationship. Try to keep calm when discussing issues with your partner, don't forget to listen (communication is 2-way!), and be specific in describing your feelings or needs. Don't assume your partner knows how you feel, why you feel that way, or what you need at any given time; they are not mind readers!! [For more information see our tip sheet, “Effective Communicating”.]

4. **Be respectful and constructive in your disagreements** – This is a hard one, but the research says couples who can see their partner’s perspective during arguments have considerably fewer disagreements and the disagreements are shorter. Ensure you agree on what you are actually arguing about, and understand that it is not you against each other; it is both of you against the problem.
5. **Compromise** – Whilst it is important to be assertive in a relationship and make your needs clear, it is also essential that both partners compromise in some areas. With two individuals with different histories and personalities, we should expect differences in opinions and preferences. Try to respect those differences and even appreciate them! Compromise is therefore essential for a good relationship.
6. **Be unselfish** – Unfortunately it can be easy to focus exclusively on how a relationship is making you fulfilled and happy, and what you think your partner should be doing to facilitate this. But the happiest of relationships involve both partners striving to ensure the happiness and wellbeing of the other one. Make it routine to go out of your way to do something for your partner’s sake that won’t necessarily directly benefit you.
7. **Openly show your love and appreciation** – Happy couples tend to show their happiness with each other more openly than dissatisfied couples. Don’t assume your partner knows you love/respect/appreciate them just because you may have been together a long time. Tell them as often as you can, particularly in relation to specific things (e.g. “I really appreciate it that you always do the washing up without me having to ask.”).
8. **Don’t be afraid to say, “I’m sorry” and “Thank you”** – These two simple phrases can significantly reduce arguments and shorten the length of post-argument “hangovers”. Even if you think that your partner “should” do a certain task/chore, saying thank you is still appreciated and provides reinforcement so your partner is more likely to do it again (and feel happy about it).
9. **Don’t compare your relationship with other relationships** – This is a common mistake, yet it is rarely helpful. Each relationship is different, and other relationships can often seem more ideal than they really are, which just leaves you feeling dissatisfied with your own relationship.

- 10. Be patient and understanding with your partner, and focus on each other's strengths more than on faults** – Of course, no one is perfect, but this can be easy to forget sometimes when we have expectations of our partner! Try to actively focus on your partner's positive qualities and strengths (e.g. list 2 things each day that you appreciate in your partner), rather than on their faults or how you want them to change. Do this for a few days and you will appreciate the benefits.

- 11. Find a happy medium by spending some time together and some time alone** – Of course quality time together as a couple is important in maintaining a satisfying relationship, but most people also require time to themselves. Find activities that you enjoy doing together, but don't necessarily force your preferences on your partner when it may be much more enjoyable for you to engage in some activities alone or with another friend.

- 12. Don't wait to start making the changes that you feel will improve the quality of your relationship – Seize the day!!** - How often do you put things off until later when you think you will have more time/energy/motivation? If you know the direction in which you want to head, start today and make small changes and small efforts each day. This will help you achieve the fulfilling relationship that you are seeking. [For further information see our tip sheet, "Goal Setting".]