

## **DOES YOUR RELATIONSHIP MEASURE UP?**

Having a healthy and happy relationship is not just based on luck or a good choice in a partner. It also requires some deliberate effort. Many people had poor role models for developing relationships, and there was no course in high school that taught us how to be happily married. So we must learn from those who have successfully created good marriages and partnerships.

Couples who engage in the following *positive* behaviors are more likely to remain together long term and will experience more satisfaction in their relationship.

- A firm commitment to each other and a desire to communicate well.
- The willingness to examine differences in a nonjudgmental and non-defensive way.
- Acknowledging parting and arriving with a deliberate connecting touch or word, such as kissing hello and goodbye, and greeting face to face.
- Having brief connecting conversations before parting and after reuniting at the end of the day.
- A genuine respect for the other's opinions, thoughts and feelings.
- The ability to validate each others feelings without condescending or defending.
- The ability to yield the floor when having a discussion, listening without trying to solve or explain.
- The ability to speak about what you want without blaming, directing, bossing, name calling, raising your voice or nagging.
- The ability to bite your tongue when the words would not be productive or connecting.
- Respectful, playful and loving physical affection.
- Time every week on a "date" with just the two of you, connecting and enjoying each other's company.
- Genuine appreciation for each other and the ability to communicate that daily, verbally or nonverbally.
- Having some separate time that is creatively fulfilling for each individual. This gives each of you something of your own that you bring to the relationship to energize it and keep it fresh and alive and growing.

There are also some easily identifiable behaviors that predict problems, conflict and potentially divorce or separation.

- Harsh language or tone, especially at the beginning of a disagreement.
- Taking things personally and becoming defensive.
- Personal attacks instead of discussion of the issues.
- Showing contempt, belittling, and harsh teasing.
- Talking negatively about partner with friends.

- Defensiveness happens often and easily.
- Refusal to validate the feelings or perspective of the other
- Closed or negative body language, such as turning away, lack of eye contact, eye rolling or finger pointing.

If your relationship engages in some of these negative behaviors, attempt to evaluate your own responses and make a decision to eliminate them one by one. You can only work on yourself. It might be easier at first to see the things that your partner is doing wrong. Pointing those things out is not likely to result in change and is likely to create defensiveness. So, identify what you are doing that needs to improve and work on that. Your spouse will notice, and will be more likely then to follow your lead. If you are missing some of the positive behaviors, try them out and see if they create more feelings of intimacy and connection for you.

So, based on these principles, here is a brief relationship test. Each of you should take the test separately and then compare your results. Does your relationship measure up?

<b>Positive relationship-enhancing actions and attitudes:</b>  <b>How often do you as a couple do these things? Place a check mark in the appropriate box.</b>	<b>Most of the time</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Rarely</b>
<b><i>We greet each other warmly after long or short absences.</i></b>			
<b><i>We are affectionate and play well with each other.</i></b>			
<b><i>We make time every day to have conversation.</i></b>			
<b><i>We are able to discuss our disagreements without fighting.</i></b>			
<b><i>We genuinely respect each other and care about each other.</i></b>			
<b><i>We listen to each other and make sure each is heard.</i></b>			
<b><i>We feel safe to be vulnerable with each other.</i></b>			
<b><i>We regularly appreciate each other and say so.</i></b>			
<b><i>We have a weekly “date” time just the two of us.</i></b>			
<b><i>We each have creative outlets that are fulfilling.</i></b>			
<b><i>We feel make the relationship a top priority.</i></b>			
<b><i>We talk about how we feel about things.</i></b>			
<b><i>We validate each others perspective and feelings.</i></b>			
<b><i>We respect each other even when arguing.</i></b>			
<b><i>We discuss disagreements without harsh or hurtful language.</i></b>			

If you answered “most of the time” to all of these statements, you probably have a very good relationship. Even with one or two statements in the “sometimes”

category, you are doing well. The goal is to be able to say most of these things are true about your relationship most of the time. This may give you some ideas of areas that you can work on together. The following list identifies negative behaviors or attitudes that can destroy a relationship. Take a look at those and see if there are places you really need to improve.

<b><i>Negative relationship-damaging actions and attitudes:</i></b>			
<b><i>How often do you as a couple do these things? Place a check mark in the appropriate box.</i></b>	<b><i>Rarely</i></b>	<b><i>Once in a while</i></b>	<b><i>Frequently</i></b>
<b><i>Built up defensiveness resurfaces in arguments.</i></b>			
<b><i>We criticize each other instead of discussing the issue.</i></b>			
<b><i>We put each other down or demonstrate contempt.</i></b>			
<b><i>Our disagreements don't resolve without hurt feelings first.</i></b>			
<b><i>We have difficulty seeing the other person's point of view.</i></b>			
<b><i>We use aggressive body language such as finger pointing.</i></b>			
<b><i>We engage the "silent treatment" in our arguments.</i></b>			
<b><i>We compete over who's to blame instead of solving the issue.</i></b>			
<b><i>We think about getting couple's counseling but put it off.</i></b>			
<b><i>We have the same arguments over and over.</i></b>			

If you answered "rarely" to all of these statements, you have a good foundation for a healthy relationship. If there are a few statements that are true about your relationship "once in a while", you can see some clear areas to work on improvement. However, if you answered "frequently" to some of these statements it is time to seek outside help. There are patterns that have been built up and need some outside assistance to uncover and change them. Therapy or marriage counseling can help to make significant changes in your relationship fairly quickly. And the sooner you seek help the easier it will be to fix. Years of negative interaction patterns are harder to interrupt and change. Don't wait.

For more information about some of the concepts in this article, check out some of the following books and links.

Individual happiness is something that Martin Seligman writes about in his book *Authentic Happiness*. In it, he offers readers a way to measure their capacity for happiness. He points to numerous studies that show which kinds of attitudes and responses lead us to greater happiness and which lead us to unhappiness so we can cultivate those that lead to greater happiness. In the chapter on Love and Relationships, he sites several research studies that indicate how to recognize a good marriage when you see one. He outlines an ongoing study performed at the Gottman Institute in Seattle, in which couples spend the

weekend in an apartment with one-way mirrors and researchers watch them interact with each other for 12 hours a day.

For more detail about the Gottman Institute, check out [www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com), or see [www.authentic happiness.com](http://www.authentic happiness.com), take the tests that are in the book and compare your self to the other respondents.

Additionally, take a look at [www.lifechallenges.org](http://www.lifechallenges.org). Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks have written some great books for couples and have identified *Five Secrets of Lasting Love*. These are; become a master of commitment, become emotionally transparent, break the cycle of blame and criticism, attend to your own creative self-expression, and become a master of verbal and nonverbal appreciation. Their website explains these concepts in more depth.

Above all, don't despair. It takes time to learn new ways of relating. Be patient. In my experience, couples who are willing to do these things make significant progress if they can be gentle with each other in the process.