



Creating a Healthy Relationship

1. Abandon the out-of-date idea that love is something that just happens to you.

All the new science tells us that romantic love is no longer a mystery. It makes perfect sense. You can learn its laws. You have more control over this riot of emotion than you think! What you understand, you can shape. The first step is to decide to learn about love and the new science of bonding.

2. Every day, try openly reaching out to someone and asking for their attention or affection.

Accept that you are a mammal and that love is an ancient, wired-in survival code. You are happier, healthier, stronger, deal with stress better, and live longer when you foster your bonds with your loved ones. It is OK to need them; they are your greatest resource. We are not designed for self-sufficiency. The strongest among us accept this need for connection and risk reaching for others.

3. The next time you feel uncertain or worried or anxious, try just mentioning this to your partner and taking their hand, or noticing their emotional signals and reaching for their hand.

The bonds of love offer us a safe haven where we can take shelter and regain our emotional balance. The latest study in our lab shows that just holding your loved one's hand can calm your brain and shut down fear.

4. See if you can notice some times when you find openness hard, and you become defensive or distant or shut down.

We know that emotional openness and responsiveness are the ground on which solid, lasting bonds stand. See if you can take the initiative and share with your partner, helping him/her understand what makes it hard to be open at this time.

5. Reflect on how you and your partner usually interact.

Can each of you reach out for the other? What do you do when the other gets upset or does not respond to you? Do you push for contact or move away? Tell your partner one thing they could do to help you reach for them rather than moving against or away from them.

6. Try to talk with your partner about how you impact each other.

Both of you offer safety or danger cues that our brain takes as serious survival information; we are all vulnerable when alone. When do you arouse real joy or contentment for your partner? When do you spark distress—a sense of being rejected or alone? Our brains code this kind of hurt in the same place and in the same way as physical pain.

7. When you get in a fight, take a deep breath and try to see the fight as if you're a fly on the ceiling.

Often underneath the discussion of problem issues, someone is asking for more emotional connection. See if you can get curious and pinpoint the dance; maybe it's the typical boogie where one pushes for contact, but the other hears criticism and steps back. See how it leaves you both feeling alone and a little scared. Talk about that.

8. Invite your partner into more closeness once a day by playing a simple empathy game.

Each person thinks of an event in their day. Then you take turns at reading each other's face and trying to pinpoint whether you see one of the six basic emotions: joy, surprise, sadness, anger, shame/embarrassment or some kind of fear. See if your guess is right. Learning to tune in matters!

9. Take a quiet moment, tune into the emotional channel and see if you can each share with your partner what you need most.

Keep it simple and concrete. Do you need comfort, reassurance, support, and empathy, a clear message of how important you are to him/her? If it's too hard to share this, share how hard it is to open up and ask.

10. Be mindful of the fact that emotional injuries derail relationships.

You can inflict great pain on your partner simply because you matter so much—you are the one he/she depends on. At a close moment, ask your lover if there are injuries that are unhealed, perhaps times when you missed their cues for support and connection. Try to help them with this hurt. (It doesn't just fade with time.) Often just telling them that you can feel how they hurt and want to help them with it works wonders.

11. Know that the best recipe for great sex is safe emotional connection and open communication.

Write down a short description of what your ideal lover might do in bed and how he or she might invite you into erotic play. Give this to your partner and see what you discover about each other. Remember, criticism literally hurts and shuts down exploration and sexuality.

12. Talk about what you learned in your family about how to deal with emotions.

Emotions are the music of the dance lovers do; it helps if the music is clear. Then

you can predict each other's intentions and know how to move together in harmony. Talk about the things you learned that make it hard to listen to or share your feelings.

13. Tell each other your main goal for the next year and see if you can find one way to support each other to reach it.

It is clear that when we know someone has our back, we are more confident and more adventurous. We achieve our goals more easily and are less derailed by disappointments.

14. Honor your connection. Create small rituals to recognize your bond.

Maybe it's a special kind of kiss when you leave in the morning or a special 10-minute bonding time when you first come home. This is sacred time. No business agendas, problem solving or distractions in the form of small electric screens are allowed.