

# Relationship Rules

**Many people have no idea what a good relationship is all about. Here are the basic ingredients for a healthy intimate relationship.**

Human beings crave intimacy, need to love and be loved. Yet people have much trouble doing so.

From many sources and many experts, I have identified some basic rules of relationships. This is by no means an exhaustive list. But it's a start. Print them out and pin them up on your refrigerator door.

1. Choose a partner wisely and well. We are attracted to people for all kinds of reasons. They remind us of someone from our past. They shower us with gifts and make us feel important. Evaluate a potential partner as you would a friend; look at their character, personality, values, their generosity of spirit, the relationship between their words and actions, their relationships with others.
2. Know your partner's beliefs about relationships. Different people have different and often conflicting beliefs about relationships. You don't want to fall in love with someone who expects lots of dishonesty in relationships; they'll create it where it doesn't exist.
3. Don't confuse sex with love. Especially in the beginning of a relationship, attraction and pleasure in sex are often mistaken for love.
4. Know your needs and speak up for them clearly. A relationship is not a guessing game. Many people, men as well as women, fear stating their needs and, as a result, camouflage them. The result is disappointment at not getting what they want and anger at a partner for not having met their (unstated) needs. Closeness cannot occur without honesty. Your partner is not a mind reader.
5. View yourselves as a team, which means you are two unique individuals bringing different perspectives and strengths. That, according to relationship expert Diane Sollee, M.S.W., director of SmartMarriages, an international effort to teach relationship skills to couples, is the value of a team—your differences.
6. Know how to respect and manage differences; it's the key to success in a relationship. Disagreements don't sink relationships. Name-calling does. Learn how to handle the negative feelings that are the unavoidable byproduct of the differences between two people. Stonewalling or avoiding conflicts is NOT managing them.
7. If you don't understand or like something your partner is doing, ask about it and why he or she is doing it. Talk and explore, don't assume.
8. Solve problems as they arise. Don't let resentments simmer. Most of what goes wrong in relationships can be traced to hurt feelings, leading partners to erect defenses against one another and to become strangers. Or enemies.
9. Learn to negotiate. Modern relationships no longer rely on roles cast by the culture. Couples create their own roles, so that virtually every act requires negotiation. It works best when good will prevails. Because people's needs are fluid and change over time, and life's demands change too, good relationships are negotiated and renegotiated all the time.
10. Listen, truly listen, to your partner's concerns and complaints without judgment. Much of the time, just having someone listen is all we need. It opens the door to confiding. And empathy is crucial. Look at things from your partner's perspective as well as your own.
11. Work hard at maintaining closeness. Closeness doesn't happen by itself. In its absence, people drift apart and are susceptible to affairs. A good relationship isn't an end goal; it's a lifelong process maintained through regular attention.
12. Take a long-range view. A marriage is an agreement to spend a future together. Check out your dreams with each other regularly to make sure you're both on the same path. Update your dreams regularly.

13. Never underestimate the power of good grooming.
14. Sex is good. Pillow talk is better. Sex is easy, intimacy is difficult. It requires honesty, openness, self-disclosure, confiding concerns, fears, sadness as well as hopes and dreams.
15. Never go to sleep angry. Try a little tenderness.
16. Apologize, apologize, apologize. Anyone can make a mistake. Repair attempts are crucial—highly predictive of marital happiness. They can be clumsy or funny, even sarcastic—but willingness to make up after an argument is central to every happy marriage.
17. Some dependency is good, but complete dependency on a partner for all one's needs is an invitation to unhappiness for both partners. We're all dependent to a degree—on friends, mentors, spouses—and men have just as many dependency needs as women.
18. Maintain self-respect and self-esteem. It's easier for someone to like you and to be around you when you like yourself. Research has shown that the more roles people fill, the more sources of self-esteem they have. Meaningful work—paid or volunteer—has long been one of the most important ways to exercise and fortify a sense of self.
19. Enrich your relationship by bringing into it new interests from outside the relationship. The more passions in life that you have and share, the richer your relationship will be. It is unrealistic to expect one person to meet all of your needs in life.
20. Cooperate, cooperate, cooperate. Share responsibilities. Relationships work ONLY when they are two-way streets, with much give and take.
21. Stay open to spontaneity.
22. Maintain your energy. Stay healthy.
23. Recognize that all relationships have their ups and downs and do not ride at a continuous high all the time. No relationship is perfect all the time. Working together through the hard times will make the relationship stronger.
24. Make good sense of a bad relationship by examining it as a reflection of your beliefs about yourself. Don't just run away from a bad relationship; you'll only repeat it with the next partner. Use it as a mirror to look at yourself, to understand what part of you is creating this relationship. Change yourself before you change your relationship.
25. Understand that love is not an absolute, not a limited commodity that you're in or out of. Says Sollee: It's a feeling that ebbs and flows depending on how you treat each other. If you learn new ways to interact, the feelings can come flowing back, often stronger than before.

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