



How healthy is your relationship with your partner?

Do people in long-term, committed relationships live longer? According to research they do, experiencing lower levels of heart disease, certain cancers, depression and stress – but only if they feel their relationships are happy and healthy. Being in love usually makes us happy, but is that enough? How do we know if our relationship is also healthy?

Defining a healthy relationship

A healthy relationship is one in which two people are partners in life, able to endure the challenges of parenting, financial ups and down, changes in family dynamics, evolving personal mutual and personal goals, tragedies and triumphs. It is when both parties:

- Are able to speak honestly and openly without fear of consequences.
- Take care of themselves and have good self-esteem independent of their relationship.
- Trust each other.
- Respect each other.
- Maintain relationships with friends and family.
- Have activities apart from one another.
- Feel safe, secure and comfortable.
- Compromise.
- Resolve conflict fairly.

Defining an unhealthy relationship

How do you know if your relationship with your partner is unhealthy? Try answering the following questions.

- Do you feel pressure to change?
- Do you worry about disagreeing with your partner?
- Are you being pressured to quit activities you enjoy?
- Do you have to justify your actions (where you go, who you see)?
- Do you feel obligated or forced to have sex?
- Do you feel controlled or manipulated or feel the need to control and manipulate?

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- Do you experience yelling or physical violence during an argument?
- Does your partner constantly criticize you?
- Do you spend time with one another?
- Do you have no common friends or have a lack of respect for each other's friends?
- Does one partner have more control over resources (food, money, home, car, etc.)?

The more times you answered yes, the more your relationship may need attention.

Communicating clearly

When you hear someone complain that their partner “doesn’t understand me” or “doesn’t hear a word I say,” they’re signs that both parties need to improve their communication skills – the foundation for any healthy relationship at home, at work or socially. Consider the following strategies to improve communication in your relationships:

- **Speak up.** Your partner may know you well but he or she is not a mind reader. Let your other half know what’s on your mind.
- **Actively listen.** Maintain eye contact, repeat back what you’ve heard and give 100 percent of your attention – and don’t interrupt when your partner is speaking.
- **Stay calm and be respectful.** Staying calm and speaking quietly is the best way to diffuse an emotional situation.
- **Pay attention to body language.** Be aware of the non-verbal messages you’re sending through your facial expressions, gestures and posture. Also, pay attention to the body language of your partner – it may help you determine how he or she is feeling or what they’re trying to say.
- **Rely on face-to-face conversation – especially when trying to resolve a conflict.** Texts, phone calls and emails don’t transmit tone of voice, facial expressions or body language and that can lead to misunderstandings.
- **Fight fair.** This means avoiding using accusatory such as “you always...”, manipulative such as “*If you loved me, you would...*”, or demeaning such as “*you’re a slob!*” language. Instead, expect to compromise in resolving problems. Also, never involve others in any conflict. Don’t complain to friends or family members or draw them into taking sides.

It’s normal for any relationship to hit bumps in the road. There will be times when both you and your partner will demonstrate negative behaviours and even the most compatible couples may at times need help and support. Building a healthy relationship takes time and effort. If you want more information about how to improve your relationship or resources and counselling services in your area, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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Practicing patience with aging parents

It's not easy watching your parents age. The father who once swept you onto his shoulders now has trouble walking and the mother who kept everyone organized now forgets her doctor's appointments. The people you depended on for so many years now depend on you. Your aging parents' resistance, denial, criticism and even anger may be making things even harder. It's sometimes difficult not to get frustrated, annoyed and impatient at the people you love the most.

Developing patience

It is said that patience is the companion of wisdom. How can we acquire the wisdom needed to be calmer, more compassionate caregivers?

Begin by acknowledging your own fears and anxieties. Witnessing your parents' physical and cognitive decline can be heartbreaking. It also makes you face your own mortality and fears of your own future. Ask yourself if it's your parents' behaviour or your own sadness and anxiety that's causing you to become impatient.

Then start identifying what triggers your impatience. This isn't always apparent because impatience often seems to appear out of nowhere. Try keeping a journal for a few weeks. Whenever you feel overwhelmed, frustrated or annoyed, write down what's happening in your life. You'll soon see what events and situations cause you to feel frustrated or exasperated and knowing the triggers makes you better able to deal with them.

Finally, try to see things from your parents' point of view. They are also feeling anger about their declining strength, frustration with their limitations, anxiety about losing their independence and fears about dying. You may be frustrated by your mother's inability to remember things but so is she. Caregiving is tough but so is aging.

The practice of patience

No matter how great your love, caregiving can try your patience – especially when you're also dealing with your own demanding personal and professional responsibilities. Expressing annoyance or anger directly to your parents may make them feel insecure and cause them to become defensive or withdraw. Instead, try some of the following strategies:

- **Slow down and breathe!** Try not to insist on getting things done *now*. No matter how busy you are, some things can't be rushed. If you start feeling annoyed or upset, stop and take three really deep breaths before you react. Inhale until your whole chest and stomach expand with your breath and then exhale slowly and completely. Deep breathing has been proven to help settle your nerves. If you find yourself becoming extremely frustrated, excuse yourself for a few minutes, go to the bathroom, drink a glass of cold water and wash your face. Separating yourself physically for a moment can help you gain control over your emotions.
- **Smile.** Fake it if you have to. It's hard to stay angry with a smile plastered on your face – it may also help your parent feel better too.

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- **Stop trying to be perfect.** Setting unrealistic expectations only results in more stress, frustration and guilt. Frustration often arises out of trying to control an uncontrollable circumstance. Distinguish between *what you can change or control and what you can't and remember you are human and will make mistakes*. Be as gentle with yourself as you are with others.
- **Practice gratitude.** No matter how frustrated you may feel, there's always something for which you can be grateful. For example, instead of becoming annoyed by the repeated questions from a parent with dementia, be grateful for what they're teaching you: patience, resourcefulness, acceptance, empathy, courage and forgiveness.
- **Find ways to express your feelings.** Caregivers need support too. Talk to friends and family members, join a caregiver's support group (either online or in-person) and if you're feeling overwhelmed, seek counselling. Contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program for information, resources in your area and local counselling services.

Caring for an aging parent can be very rewarding. It can also be physically and emotionally exhausting. Taking care of yourself is perhaps the most important thing you can do as a caregiver. Get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet, exercise and find time for fun. Be as ready as you can to treasure the moments.

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