

Every successful relationship is successful for the same exact reasons

Written by [Mark Manson](#)

LOVE IS PATIENT



Respect each other. (Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)

Hey, guess what? I got married two weeks ago. And like most people, I asked some of the older and wiser folks around me for a couple quick words of advice from their own marriages to make sure my wife and I didn't shit the (same) bed. I think most newlyweds do this, especially after a few cocktails from the open bar they just paid way too much money for.

But, of course, not being satisfied with just a few wise words, I had to take it a step further.

See, I have access to hundreds of thousands of smart, amazing people through my site. So why not consult them? Why not ask them for *their* best relationship/marriage advice? Why not synthesize all of *their* wisdom and experience into something straightforward and immediately applicable to any relationship, no matter who you are?

Why not crowdsource THE ULTIMATE RELATIONSHIP GUIDE TO END ALL RELATIONSHIP GUIDES™ from the sea of smart and savvy partners and lovers here?

So, that's what I did. I sent out the call the week before my wedding: anyone who has been married for 10+ years and is still happy in their relationship, what lessons would you pass down to others if you could? What is working for you and your partner? And if you're divorced, what didn't work previously?

The response was overwhelming. Almost 1,500 people replied, many of whom sent in responses measured in pages, not paragraphs. It took almost two weeks to comb through them all, but I did. And what I found stunned me...

They were incredibly repetitive.

That's not an insult or anything. Actually, it's kind of the opposite. These were all smart and well-spoken people from all walks of life, from all around the world, all with their own histories, tragedies, mistakes, and triumphs...

And yet they were all saying pretty much the same dozen things.

Which means that those dozen or so things must be pretty damn important... and more importantly, they work.

Here's what they are:

1. Be together for the right reasons

Don't ever be with someone because someone else pressured you to. I got married the first time because I was raised Catholic and that's what you were supposed to do. Wrong. I got married the second time because I was miserable and lonely and thought having a loving wife would fix everything for me. Also wrong. Took me three tries to figure out what should have been obvious from the beginning, the only reason you should ever be with the person you're with is because you simply love being around them. It really is that simple.

– Greg

Before we even get into what you should do in your relationship, let's start with what not to do.

When I sent out my request to readers for advice, I added a caveat that turned out to be illuminating. I asked people who were on their second or third (or fourth) marriages what they did wrong. Where did they mess up?

By far, the most common answer was “being with the person for the wrong reasons.”

Some of these wrong reasons included:

- Pressure from friends and family
- Feeling like a “loser” because they were single and settling for the first person that came along
- Being together for image—because the relationship *looked good* on paper (or in photos), not because the two people actually admired each other
- Being young and naive and hopelessly in love and thinking that love would solve everything

As we'll see throughout the rest of this article, everything that makes a relationship “work” (and by work, I mean that it is happy and sustainable for both people involved) requires a genuine, deep-level admiration for each other. Without that mutual admiration, everything else will unravel.

The other “wrong” reason to enter into a relationship is, like Greg said, to “fix” yourself. This desire to use the love of someone else to soothe your own emotional problems inevitably leads to codependence, an unhealthy and damaging dynamic between two people where they tacitly agree to use each other's love as a distraction from their own self-loathing. We'll get more into codependence later in this article, but for now, it's useful to point out that love, itself, is neutral. It is something that can be both healthy or unhealthy, helpful or harmful, depending on *why* and *how* you love someone else and are loved by someone else. By itself, [love is never enough](#) to sustain a relationship.

2. Have realistic expectations about relationships and romance

You are absolutely not going to be absolutely gaga over each other every single day for the rest of your lives, and all this “happily ever after” bullshit is just setting people up for failure. They go into relationship with these unrealistic expectations. Then, the instant they realize they aren’t “gaga” anymore, they think the relationship is broken and over, and they need to get out. No! There will be days, or weeks, or maybe even longer, when you aren’t all mushy-gushy in-love. You’re even going to wake up some morning and think, “Ugh, you’re still here....” That’s normal! And more importantly, sticking it out is totally worth it, because that, too, will change. In a day, or a week, or maybe even longer, you’ll look at that person and a giant wave of love will inundate you, and you’ll love them so much you think your heart can’t possibly hold it all and is going to burst. Because a love that’s alive is also constantly evolving. It expands and contracts and mellows and deepens. It’s not going to be the way it used to be, or the way it will be, and it shouldn’t be. I think if more couples understood that, they’d be less inclined to panic and rush to break up or divorce.

– Paula

Love is a funny thing. In ancient times, people genuinely considered love a sickness. Parents warned their children against it, and adults quickly arranged marriages before their children were old enough to do something dumb in the name of their emotions.

That’s because love, while making us feel all giddy and high as if we had just snorted a shoebox full of cocaine, makes us highly irrational. We all know that guy (or girl) who dropped out of school, sold their car, and spent the money to elope on the beaches of Tahiti. We all also know that that guy (or girl) ended up sulking back a few years later feeling like a moron, not to mention broke.

That’s unbridled love. It’s nature’s way of tricking us into doing insane and

irrational things to procreate with another person—probably because if we stopped to think about the repercussions of having kids, and being with the same person forever and ever, no one would ever do it. As Robin Williams used to joke, “God gave man a brain and a penis and only enough blood to operate one at a time.”

Romantic love is a trap designed to get two people to overlook each other’s faults long enough to get some babymaking done. It generally only lasts for [a few years](#) at most. That dizzying high you get staring into your lover’s eyes as if they are the stars that make up the heavens—yeah, that mostly goes away. It does for everybody. So, once it’s gone, you need to know that you’ve buckled yourself down with a human being you genuinely respect and enjoy being with, otherwise things are going to get rocky.

True love—that is, deep, abiding love that is impervious to emotional whims or fancy—is a choice. It’s a constant commitment to a person regardless of the present circumstances. It’s a commitment to a person who you understand isn’t going to always make you happy—nor should they!—and a person who will need to rely on you at times, just as you will rely on them.

That form of love is much harder. Primarily because it often doesn’t feel very good. It’s unglamorous. It’s lots of early morning doctor’s visits. It’s cleaning up bodily fluids you’d rather not be cleaning up. It’s dealing with another person’s insecurities and fears and ideas, even when you don’t want to.

But this form of love is also far more satisfying and meaningful. And, at the end of the day, it brings true happiness, not just another series of highs.

Happily Ever After doesn’t exist. Every day you wake up and decide to love your partner and your life—the good, the bad and the ugly. Some days it’s a struggle and some days you feel like the luckiest person in the world.

– Tara

Many people never learn how to breach this [deep, unconditional love](#).

Many people are instead [addicted to the](#) ups and downs of romantic love. They are in it for the feels, so to speak. And when the feels run out, so do they.

Many people get into a relationship as a way to compensate for something they lack or [hate within themselves](#). This is a one-way ticket to a [toxic relationship](#) because it makes your love conditional—you will love your partner *as long* as they help you feel better about yourself. You will give to them *as long* as they give to you. You will make them happy *as long* as they make you happy.

This conditionality prevents any true, deep-level intimacy from emerging and chains the relationship to the bucking throes of each person's internal dramas.

3. The most important factor in a relationship is not communication, but respect

What I can tell you is the #1 thing, most important above all else is respect. It's not sexual attraction, looks, shared goals, religion or lack of, nor is it love. There are times when you won't feel love for your partner. That is the truth. But you never want to lose respect for your partner. Once you lose respect you will never get it back.

– Laurie

As we scanned through the hundreds of responses we received, my assistant and I began to notice an interesting trend.

People who had been through divorces and/or had only been with their partners for 10-15 years almost always talked about communication being the most important part of making things work. Talk frequently. Talk openly. Talk about everything, even if it hurts.

And there is some merit to that (which I'll get to later).

But we noticed that the thing people with marriages going on 20, 30, or even 40 years talked about most was respect.

My sense is that these people, through sheer quantity of experience, have learned that communication, no matter how open, transparent and disciplined, will always break down at some point. Conflicts are ultimately unavoidable, and feelings will always be hurt.

And the only thing that can save you and your partner, that can cushion you both to the hard landing [of human fallibility](#), is an unerring respect for one another, the fact that you hold each other in high esteem, believe in one another—often more than you each believe in yourselves—and trust that your partner is doing his/her best with what they've got.

Without that bedrock of respect underneath you, you will doubt each other's intentions. You will judge their choices and encroach on their independence. You will feel the need to hide things from one another for fear of criticism. And this is when the cracks in the edifice begin to appear.

My husband and I have been together 15 years this winter. I've thought a lot about what seems to be keeping us together, while marriages around us crumble (seriously, it's everywhere... we seem to be at that age). The one word that I keep coming back to is "respect." Of course, this means showing respect, but that is too superficial. Just showing it isn't enough. You have to feel it deep within you. I deeply and genuinely respect him for his work ethic, his patience, his creativity, his intelligence, and his core values. From this respect comes everything else—trust, patience, perseverance (because sometimes life is really hard and you both just have to persevere). I want to hear what he has to say (even if I don't agree with him) because I respect his opinion. I want to enable him to have some free time within our insanely busy lives because I respect his choices of how he spends his time and who he spends time with. And, really, what this mutual respect means is that we feel safe sharing our deepest, most intimate selves with each other.

– Nicole

You must also respect yourself. Just as your partner must also respect his/herself. Because without that self-respect, you will not feel worthy of the respect afforded by your partner. You will be unwilling to accept it and you will find ways to undermine it. You will constantly feel the need to compensate and prove yourself worthy of love, which will just backfire.

Respect for your partner and respect for yourself are intertwined. As a reader named Olov put it, “Respect yourself and your wife. Never talk badly to or about her. If you don’t respect your wife, you don’t respect yourself. You chose her—live up to that choice.”

So what does respect *look like*?

Common examples given by many readers:

- NEVER talk shit about your partner or complain about them to your friends. If you have a problem with your partner, you should be having that conversation *with them*, not with your friends. Talking bad about them will erode your respect for them and make you feel worse about being with them, not better.
- Respect that they have different hobbies, interests, and perspectives from you. Just because you would spend your time and energy differently, doesn’t mean it’s better/worse.
- Respect that they have an equal say in the relationship, that you are a team, and if one person on the team is not happy, then the team is not succeeding.
- No secrets. If you’re really in this together and you respect one another, everything should be fair game. Have a crush on someone else? Discuss it. Laugh about it. Had a weird sexual fantasy that sounds ridiculous? Be open about it. Nothing should be off-limits.

Respect goes hand-in-hand with trust. And trust is the lifeblood of any relationship (romantic or otherwise). Without trust, there can be no sense of intimacy or comfort. Without trust, your partner will become a liability in your mind, something to be avoided and analyzed, not a protective homebase for your heart and your mind.

4. Talk openly about everything, especially the stuff that hurts

We always talk about what's bothering us with each other, not anyone else! We have so many friends who are in marriages that are not working well and they tell me all about what is wrong. I can't help them, they need to be talking to their spouse about this, that's the only person who can help them figure it out. If you can figure out a way to be able to always talk with your spouse about what's bugging you then you can work on the issue.

– Ronnie

There can be no secrets. Secrets divide you. Always.

– Tracey

I receive hundreds of emails from readers each week [asking for life advice](#). A large percentage of these emails involve their struggling romantic relationships.

(These emails, too, are surprisingly repetitive.)

A couple years ago, I discovered that I was answering the vast majority of these relationship emails with the exact same response.

“Take this email you just sent to me, print it out, and show it to your partner. Then come back and ask again.”

This response became so common that I actually put it on my [contact form](#) on the site because I was so tired of copying and pasting it.

If something bothers you in the relationship, you must be willing to say it. Saying it builds trust and trust builds intimacy. It may hurt, but you still need to do it. No one else can fix your relationship for you. Nor should anyone else. Just as causing pain to your muscles allows them to grow back stronger, often introducing some pain into your relationship [through vulnerability](#) is the only way to make the relationship stronger.

Behind respect, trust was the most commonly mentioned trait for a healthy relationship. Most people mentioned it in the context of [jealousy and fidelity](#)—trust your partner to go off on their own, don't get insecure or angry if you see them talking with someone else, etc.

But trust goes much deeper than that. Because when you're really talking about the long-haul, you start to get into some serious life-or-death shit. If you ended up with cancer tomorrow, would you trust your partner to stick with you and take care of you? Would you trust your partner to care for your child for a week by themselves? Do you trust them to handle your money or make sound decisions under pressure? Do you trust them to not turn on you or blame you when you make mistakes?

These are hard things to do. And they're even harder to think about early on in a relationship. Trust at the beginning of a relationship is easy. It's like, "Oh, I forgot my phone at her apartment, I trust her not to sell it and buy crack with the money... I think."

But the deeper the commitment, the more intertwined your lives become, and the more you will have to trust your partner to act in your interest in your absence.

There's an old Ben Folds song where he sings, "It seems to me if you cannot trust, you cannot be trusted." Distrust has a tendency to breed distrust. If your partner is always snooping through your stuff, accusing you of doing things you didn't do, and questioning all of your decisions, naturally, you will start to question their intentions as well—Why is she so insecure? What if she is hiding something herself?

The key to fostering and maintaining trust in the relationship is for both partners to be completely transparent and vulnerable:

- If something is bothering you, say something. This is important not only for addressing issues as they arise, but it proves to your partner that you have nothing to hide.
- Those icky, insecure things you hate sharing with people? Share them

with your partner. Not only is it healing, but you and your partner need to have a good understanding of each other's insecurities and the way you each choose to compensate for them.

- Make promises and then *stick to them*. The only way to truly rebuild trust after it's been broken is through a proven track record over time. You cannot build that track record until you own up to previous mistakes and set about correcting them.
- Learn to discern your partner's own shady behavior from your own insecurities (and vice-versa). This is hard and will likely require confrontation to get to the bottom of. But in most relationship fights, one person thinks something is completely "normal" and the other thinks it's really grade-A "fucked up." It's often extremely hard to distinguish who is being irrational and insecure and who is being reasonable and merely standing up for themselves. Be patient in rooting out what's what, and when it's your big, gnarly insecurity (and sometimes it will be, trust me), be honest about it. Own up to it. And strive to be better.

Trust is like a china plate. If you drop it and it breaks, you can put it back together with a lot of work and care. If you drop it and break it a second time, it will split into twice as many pieces and it will require far more time and care to put back together again. But drop and break it enough times, and it will shatter into so many pieces that you will never be able to put it back together again, no matter what you do.

5. A healthy relationship means two healthy individuals

Understand that it is up to you to make yourself happy, it is NOT the job of your spouse. I am not saying you shouldn't do nice things for each other, or that your partner can't make you happy sometimes. I am just saying don't lay expectations on your partner to "make you happy." It is not their responsibility. Figure out as individuals what makes you happy as an individual, be happy yourself, then you each bring that to the relationship.

– Mandy

A lot is made about “sacrifices” in a relationship. You are supposed to keep the relationship happy by consistently sacrificing yourself for your partner and their wants and needs.

There is some truth to that. Every relationship requires each person to consciously choose to give something up at times.

But the problem is when *all of the relationship's happiness* is contingent on the other person and both people are in a constant state of sacrifice. Just read that again. That sounds horrible. It reminds me of an old Marilyn Manson song, “Shoot myself to love you; if I loved myself, I’d be shooting you.” A relationship based on sacrifices cannot be sustained, and will eventually become damaging to both individuals in it.

Shitty, codependent relationships have an inherent stability because you’re both locked in an implicit bargain to tolerate the other person’s bad behavior because they’re tolerating yours, and neither of you wants to be alone. On the surface, it seems like “compromising in relationships because that’s what people do,” but the reality is that resentments build up, and both parties become the other person’s emotional hostage against having to face and deal with their own bullshit (it took me 14 years to realize this, by the way).

– Karen

A healthy and happy relationship requires two [healthy and happy individuals](#). Keyword here: “individuals.” That means two people with [their own identities](#), their *own* interests and perspectives, and things they do by themselves, on their *own* time.

This is why attempting to control your partner (or submitting control over yourself to your partner) to make them “happy” ultimately backfires—it allows the individual identities of each person to be destroyed, the very identities that attracted each person and brought them together in the first place.

Don’t try to change them. This is the person you chose. They were good

enough to marry so don't expect them to change now.

– Allison

Don't ever give up who you are for the person you're with. It will only backfire and make you both miserable. Have the courage to be who you are, and most importantly, let your partner be who they are. Those are the two people who fell in love with each other in the first place.

– Dave

But how does one do this? Well, it's a bit counterintuitive. But it's something hundreds and hundreds of successful couples echoed in their emails...

6. Give each other space

Be sure you have a life of your own, otherwise it is harder to have a life together. What do I mean? Have your own interests, your own friends, your own support network, and your own hobbies. Overlap where you can, but not being identical should give you something to talk about and expose one another to. It helps to expand your horizons as a couple, but isn't so boring as both living the exact same life.

– Anonymous

Among the emails, one of the most popular themes was the importance of creating space and separation from one another.

People sung the praises of separate checking accounts, separate credit cards, having different friends and hobbies, taking separate vacations from one another each year (this has been a big one in my own relationship). Some even went so far as to recommend separate bathrooms or even separate bedrooms.

Some people are afraid to give their partner freedom and independence. This comes from a lack of trust and/or insecurity that if we give our partner too much space, they will discover they don't want to be with us anymore.

Generally, the more uncomfortable we are with our own worthiness in the relationship and to be loved, the more we will try to control the relationship and our partner's behaviors.

BUT, more importantly, this inability to let our partners *be who they are*, is a subtle form of disrespect. After all, if you can't trust your husband to have a simple golfing trip with his buddies, or you're afraid to let your wife go out for drinks after work, what does that say about your respect for their ability to handle themselves well? What does it say for your respect *for yourself*? I mean, after all, if you believe a couple after-work drinks is enough to steer your girlfriend away from you, you clearly don't think too highly of yourself.

Going on seventeen years. If you love your partner enough you will let them be who they are, you don't own them, who they hang with, what they do or how they feel. Drives me nuts when I see women not let their husbands go out with the guys or are jealous of other women.

– Natalie

7. You and your partner will grow and change in unexpected ways; embrace it

Over the course of 20 years we both have changed tremendously. We have changed faiths, political parties, numerous hair colors and styles, but we love each other and possibly even more. Our grown kids constantly tell their friends what hopeless romantics we are. And the biggest thing that keeps us strong is not giving a fuck about what anyone else says about our relationship.

– Dotti

One theme that came up repeatedly, especially with those married 20+ years, was how much each individual changes as the decades roll on, and how ready each of you have to be to embrace the other partner as these changes occur. One reader commented that at her wedding, an elderly family member told her, "One day many years from now, you will wake up

and your spouse will be a different person, make sure you fall in love with that person too.”

It logically follows that if there is a bedrock of respect for each individual’s interest and values underpinning the relationship, and each individual is encouraged to foster their own growth and development, that each person will, as time goes on, evolve in different and unexpected ways. It’s then up to the couple to communicate and make sure that they are consistently a) aware of the changes going on in their partner, and b) continually accepting and respecting those changes as they occur.

Now, you’re probably reading this and thinking, “Sure, Bill likes sausage now, but in a few years he might prefer steak. I can get on board with that.”

No, I’m talking some pretty serious life changes. Remember, if you’re going to spend decades together, some really heavy shit will hit (and break) the fan. Among [major life changes](#) people told me their marriages went through (and survived): changing religions, moving countries, death of family members (including children), supporting elderly family members, changing political beliefs, even changing sexual orientation, and in a couple cases, gender identification.

Amazingly, these couples survived because their respect for each other allowed them to adapt and allow each person to continue to flourish and grow.

When you commit to someone, you don’t actually know who you’re committing to. You know who they are today, but you have no idea who this person is going to be in five years, ten years, and so on. You have to be prepared for the unexpected, and truly ask yourself if you admire this person regardless of the superficial (or not-so-superficial) details, because I promise almost all of them at some point are going to either change or go away.

– Michael

But this isn’t easy, of course. In fact, at times, it will be downright soul-

destroying.

Which is why you need to make sure you and your partner know how to fight.

8. Get good at fighting

The relationship is a living, breathing thing. Much like the body and muscles, it cannot get stronger without stress and challenge. You have to fight. You have to hash things out. Obstacles make the marriage.

– Ryan Saplan

John Gottman is a hot-shit psychologist and researcher who has spent over 30 years analyzing married couples and looking for keys to why they stick together and why they break up. Chances are, if you've read any relationship advice article before, you've either directly or indirectly been exposed to his work. When it comes to, "[Why do people stick together?](#)" he dominates the field.

What Gottman does is he gets married couples in a room, puts some cameras on them, and then he asks them to have a fight.

Notice: he doesn't ask them to talk about how great the other person is. He doesn't ask them what they like best about their relationship.

He asks them to fight. Pick something they're having problems with and talk about it for the camera.

And from simply analyzing the film for the couple's discussion (or shouting match, whatever), he's able to predict with startling accuracy whether a couple will divorce or not.

But what's most interesting about Gottman's research is that the things that lead to divorce are not necessarily what you think. Successful couples, like unsuccessful couples, he found, fight consistently. And some of them fight furiously.

He has been able to narrow down four characteristics of a couple that tend to lead to divorces (or breakups). He has gone on and called these “the four horsemen” of the relationship apocalypse in his books. They are:

1. Criticizing your partner’s character (“You’re so stupid” vs “That thing you did was stupid”)
2. Defensiveness (or basically, blame shifting, “I wouldn’t have done that if you weren’t late all the time”)
3. Contempt (putting down your partner and making them feel inferior)
4. Stonewalling (withdrawing from an argument and ignoring your partner)

The reader emails back this up as well. Out of the 1,500-some-odd emails, *almost every single one referenced the importance of dealing with conflicts well.*

Advice given by readers included:

- Never insult or name-call your partner. Put another way: hate the sin, love the sinner. Gottman’s research found that “contempt”—belittling and demeaning your partner—is the number one predictor of divorce.
- Do not bring previous fights/arguments into current ones. This solves nothing and just makes the fight twice as bad as it was before. Yeah, you forgot to pick up groceries on the way home, but what does him being rude to your mother last Thanksgiving have to do with anything?
- If things get too heated, take a breather. Remove yourself from the situation and come back once emotions have cooled off a bit. This is a big one for me personally—sometimes when things get intense with my wife, I get overwhelmed and just leave for a while. I usually walk around the block two or three times and let myself seethe for about 15 minutes. Then I come back and we’re both a bit calmer and we can resume the discussion with a much more conciliatory tone.
- Remember that being “right” is not as important as both people feeling respected and heard. You may be right, but if you are right in such a way that makes your partner feel unloved, then there’s no real

winner.

But all of this takes for granted another important point: be willing to fight in the first place.

I think when people talk about the necessity for “good communication” all of the time (a vague piece of advice that everyone says but few people seem to actually clarify what it means), this is what they mean: be willing to have the uncomfortable talks. Be willing to have the fights. Say the ugly things and get it all out in the open.

This was a constant theme from the divorced readers. Dozens (hundreds?) of them had more or less the same sad story to tell:

But there’s no way on God’s Green Earth this is her fault alone. There were times when I saw huge red flags. Instead of trying to figure out what in the world was wrong, I just plowed ahead. I’d buy more flowers, or candy, or do more chores around the house. I was a “good” husband in every sense of the word. But what I wasn’t doing was paying attention to the right things. She wasn’t telling me there wasn’t a problem but there was. And instead of saying something, I ignored all of the signals.

– Jim

9. Get good at forgiving

When you end up being right about something—shut up. You can be right and be quiet at the same time. Your partner will already know you’re right and will feel loved knowing that you didn’t wield it like a bastard sword.

– Brian

In marriage, there’s no such thing as winning an argument.

– Bill

To me, perhaps the most interesting nugget from Gottman’s research is the

fact that most successful couples don't actually resolve all of their problems. In fact, his findings were [completely backwards](#) from what most people actually expect: people in lasting and happy relationships have problems that never completely go away, while couples that feel as though they need to agree and compromise on everything end up feeling miserable and falling apart.

To me, like everything else, this comes back to the respect thing. If you have two different individuals sharing a life together, it's inevitable that they will have different values and perspectives on some things and clash over it. The key here is not changing the other person—as the desire to change your partner is inherently disrespectful (to both them and yourself)—but rather it's to simply abide by the difference, love them despite it, and when things get a little rough around the edges, to forgive them for it.

Everyone says that compromise is key, but that's not how my husband and I see it. It's more about seeking understanding. Compromise is bullshit, because it leaves both sides unsatisfied, losing little pieces of themselves in an effort to get along. On the other hand, refusing to compromise is just as much of a disaster, because you turn your partner into a competitor (“I win, you lose”). These are the wrong goals, because they're outcome-based rather than process-based. When your goal is to find out where your partner is coming from—to truly understand on a deep level—you can't help but be altered by the process. Conflict becomes much easier to navigate because you see more of the context.

– Michelle

I've written for years that the [key to happiness](#) is not achieving your [lofty dreams](#), or experiencing some dizzying high, but rather [finding the struggles](#) and challenges that you enjoy enduring.

A similar concept seems to be true in relationships: your perfect partner is not someone who creates no problems in the relationship, rather your perfect partner is someone who creates problems in the relationship that you feel good about dealing with.

But how do you get good at forgiving? What does that actually mean? Again, some advice from the readers:

- When an argument is over, it's over. Some couples went as far as to make this the golden rule in their relationship. When you're done fighting, it doesn't matter who was right and who was wrong, it doesn't matter if someone was mean and someone was nice. It's over. It's in the past. And you both agree to leave it there, not bring it up every month for the next three years.
- There's no scoreboard. No one is trying to "win" here. There's no, "You owe me this because you screwed up the laundry last week." There's no, "I'm always right about financial stuff, so you should listen to me." There's no, "I bought her three gifts and she only did me one favor." Everything in the relationship is given and done unconditionally—that is: without expectation or manipulation.
- When your partner screws up, you separate the intentions from the behavior. You recognize the things you love and admire in your partner and understand that he/she was simply doing the best that they could, yet messed up out of ignorance. Not because they're a bad person. Not because they secretly hate you and want to divorce you. Not because there's somebody else in the background pulling them away from you. They are a good person. That's why you are with them. If you ever lose your faith in that, then you will begin to erode your faith in yourself.

And finally, pick your battles wisely. You and your partner only have [so many fucks to give](#), make sure you both are saving them for the real things that matter.

Been happily married 40+ years. One piece of advice that comes to mind: choose your battles. Some things matter, worth getting upset about. Most do not. Argue over the little things and you'll find yourself arguing endlessly; little things pop up all day long, it takes a toll over time. Like Chinese water torture: minor in the short term, corrosive over time. Consider: is this a little thing or a big thing? Is it worth the

cost of arguing?

– Fred

10. The little things add up to big things

If you don't take the time to meet for lunch, go for a walk or go out to dinner and a movie with some regularity then you basically end up with a roommate. Staying connected through life's ups and downs is critical. Eventually your kids grow up, your obnoxious brother-in-law will join a monastery and your parents will die. When that happens, guess who's left? You got it... Mr./Mrs. Right! You don't want to wake up 20 years later and be staring at a stranger because life broke the bonds you formed before the shitstorm started. You and your partner need to be the eye of the hurricane.

– Brian

Of the 1,500 responses I got, I'd say about half of them mentioned at some point or another one simple but effective piece of advice: Don't ever stop doing the little things. They add up.

Things as simple as saying, "I love you," before going to bed, holding hands during a movie, doing small favors here and there, helping with some household chores. Even cleaning up when you accidentally pee on the toilet seat (seriously, someone said that)—these things all matter and add up over the long run.

The same way Fred, married for 40+ years, stated above that arguing over small things consistently wears you both down, "like Chinese water torture," so do the little favors and displays of affection add up. Don't lose them.

This seems to become particularly important once kids enter the picture. The big message I heard hundreds of times about kids: put the marriage first.

Children are worshipped in our culture these days. Parents are expected to sacrifice everything for them. But the best way to raise healthy and happy kids is to maintain a healthy and happy marriage. Good kids don't make a good marriage. A good marriage makes good kids. So keep your marriage the top priority.

– Susan

Readers implored to maintain regular “date nights,” to plan weekend getaways and to make time for sex, even when you're tired, even when you're stressed and exhausted and the baby is crying, even when Junior has soccer practice at 5:30am the next day. Make time for it. It's worth it.

Oh, and speaking of sex...

11. Sex matters... a LOT

And you know how you know if you or her are slipping? Sex starts to slide. Period. No other test required.

– Anonymous

I still remember back in college, it was one of my first relationships with a cute little redhead. We were young and naive and crazy about each other. And, because we happened to live in the same dorm, we were banging like rabbits.

It was everything a 19-year-old male could ask for.

Then after a month or two, we hit our first “rough patch” in the relationship. We fought more often, found ourselves getting annoyed with each other, and suddenly our multiple-times-per-day habit magically dried up. And it wasn't just with her, but with me. To my surprised adolescent male mind, it was actually possible to have sex available to you yet not want it.

It was almost as if sex was connected to emotions! For a dumb 19-year-old, this was a complete shocker.

That was the first time I discovered a truth about relationships: sex is the State of the Union. If the relationship is good, the sex will be good. You both will be wanting it and enjoying it. When the relationship is bad—when there are unresolved problems and unaddressed negative emotions—then the sex will often be the first thing to go out the window.

This was reiterated to me hundreds of times in the emails. The nature of the sex itself varied quite a bit among couples—some couples take sexual experimentation seriously, others are staunch believers in frequency, others get way into fantasies—but the underlying principle was the same everywhere: both partners should be sexually satisfied as often as possible.

But sex not only keeps the relationship healthy, many readers suggested that they use it to heal their relationships. That when things are a bit frigid between them or that they have some problems going on, a lot of stress, or other issues (i.e., kids), they even go so far as to schedule sexy time for themselves. They say it's important. And it's worth it.

A few people even said that when things start to feel stale in the relationship, they agree to have sex every day for a week. Then, as if by magic, by the next week, they feel great again.

Cue the Marvin Gaye tunes:

Marvin Gaye - Sexual Healing



12. Be practical, and create relationship rules

There is no 50/50 in housecleaning, child rearing, vacation planning, dishwasher emptying, gift buying, dinner making, money making, etc. The sooner everyone accepts that, the happier everyone is. We all have things we like to do and hate to do; we all have things we are good at and not so good at. TALK to your partner about those things when it comes to dividing and conquering all the crap that has to get done in life.

– Liz

Everyone has an image in their mind of how a relationship should work. Both people share responsibilities. Both people manage to finely balance their time together with the time for themselves. Both pursue engaging and invigorating interests on their own and then share the benefits together. Both take turns cleaning the toilet and blowing each other and cooking gourmet lasagna for the extended family at Thanksgiving (although not all at the same time).

Then there's how relationships actually work.

Messy. Stressful. Miscommunication flying everywhere so that both of you feel as though you're in a perpetual state of talking to a wall.

The fact is relationships are imperfect, messy affairs. And it's for the simple reason that they're comprised of imperfect, messy people—people who want different things at different times in different ways and oh, they forgot to tell you? Well, maybe if you had been listening, asshole.

The common theme of the advice here was “Be pragmatic.” If the wife is a lawyer and spends 50 hours at the office every week, and the husband is an artist and can work from home most days, it makes more sense for him to handle most of the day-to-day parenting duties. If the wife's standard of cleanliness looks like a Home & Garden catalog, and the husband has gone six months without even noticing the light fixture hanging from the ceiling, then it makes sense that the wife handles more of the home cleaning duties.

It's economics 101: division of labor makes everyone better off. Figure out what you are each good at, what you each love/hate doing, and then arrange accordingly. My wife loves cleaning (no, seriously), but she hates smelly stuff. So guess who gets dishes and garbage duty? Me. Because I [don't give a fuck](#). I'll eat off the same plate seven times in a row. I couldn't smell a dead rat even if it was sleeping under my pillow. I'll toss garbage around all day. Here honey, let me get that for you.

On top of that, many couples suggested laying out rules for the relationship. This sounds cheesy, but ultimately, it's practical. To what degree will you share finances? How much debt will be taken on or paid off? How much can each person spend without consulting the other? What purchases should be done together or do you trust each other to do separately? How do you decide which vacations to go on?

Have meetings about this stuff. Sure, it's not sexy or cool, but it needs to get done. You're sharing a life together and so you need to plan and

account for each person's needs and resources.

One person even said that she and her husband have “annual reviews” every year. She immediately told me not to laugh, but that she was serious. They have annual reviews where they discuss everything that's going on in the household that they like and don't like and what they can do in the coming year to change it. This sort of stuff sounds lame but it's what keeps couples in touch with what's going on with each other. And because they always have their fingers on the pulse of each other's needs, they're more likely to grow together rather than grow apart.

13. Learn to ride the waves

I have been married for 44 years (4 children, 6 grandchildren). I think the most important thing that I have learned in those years is that the love you feel for each other is constantly changing. Sometimes you feel a deep love and satisfaction, other times you want nothing to do with your spouse; sometimes you laugh together, sometimes you're screaming at each other. It's like a roller-coaster ride, ups and downs all the time, but as you stay together long enough the downs become less severe and the ups are more loving and contented. So even if you feel like you could never love your partner any more, that can change, if you give it a chance. I think people give up too soon. You need to be the kind of person that you want your spouse to be. When you do that it makes a world of difference.

– Chris

Out of the hundreds of analogies I saw these past few weeks, one stuck with me. A nurse emailed saying that she used to work with a lot of geriatric patients. And one day she was talking to a man in his late-80s about marriage and why his had lasted so long. The man said something like, “relationships exist as waves, people need to learn how to ride them.” Upon asking him to explain, he said that, like the ocean, there are constant waves of emotion going on within a relationship, ups and downs—some waves last for hours, some last for months or even years. The key is

understanding that few of those waves have anything to do with the quality of the relationship—people lose jobs, family members die, couples relocate, switch careers, make a lot of money, lose a lot of money. Your job as a committed partner is to simply ride the waves with the person you love, regardless of where they go. Because ultimately, none of these waves last. And you simply end up with each other.

Two years ago, I suddenly began resenting my wife for any number of reasons. I felt as if we were floating along, doing a great job of co-existing and co-parenting, but not sustaining a real connection. It deteriorated to the point that I considered separating from her; however, whenever I gave the matter intense thought, I could not pinpoint a single issue that was a deal breaker. I knew her to be an amazing person, mother, and friend. I bit my tongue a lot and held out hope that the malaise would pass as suddenly as it had arrived. Fortunately, it did and I love her more than ever. So the final bit of wisdom is to afford your spouse the benefit of the doubt. If you have been happy for such a long period, that is the case for good reason. Be patient and focus on the many aspects of her that still exist that caused you to fall in love in the first place.

– Kevin

I'd like to take a moment to thank all of the readers who took the time to write something and send it to me. As always, it was humbling to see all of the wisdom and life experience out there. There were many, many, many excellent responses, with kind, heartfelt advice. It was hard to choose the ones that ended up here, and in many cases, I could have put a dozen different quotes that said almost the exact same thing.

Exercises like this always amaze me because when you ask thousands of people for advice on something, you expect to receive thousands of different answers. But [in both cases](#) now, the vast majority of the advice has largely been the same. It shows you how similar we really are. And how no matter how bad things may get, we are never as alone as we think.

I would end this by summarizing the advice in one tidy section. But once again, a reader named Margo did it far better than I ever could. So we'll end with Margo:

You can work through anything as long as you are not destroying yourself or each other. That means emotionally, physically, financially, or spiritually. Make nothing off limits to discuss. Never shame or mock each other for the things you do that make you happy. Write down why you fell in love and read it every year on your anniversary (or more often). Write love letters to each other often. Make each other first. When kids arrive, it will be easy to fall into a frenzy of making them the only focus of your life...do not forget the love that produced them. You must keep that love alive and strong to feed them love. Spouse comes first. Each of you will continue to grow. Bring the other one with you. Be the one that welcomes that growth. Don't think that the other one will hold the relationship together. Both of you should assume it's up to you so that you are both working on it. Be passionate about cleaning house, preparing meals, and taking care of your home. This is required of everyone daily, make it fun and happy and do it together. Do not complain about your partner to anyone. Love them for who they are. Make love even when you are not in the mood. Trust each other. Give each other the benefit of the doubt always. Be transparent. Have nothing to hide. Be proud of each other. Have a life outside of each other, but share it through conversation. Pamper and adore each other. Go to counseling now before you need it so that you are both open to working on the relationship together. Disagree with respect to each other's feelings. Be open to change and accepting of differences. Print this and refer to it daily.

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