

Learn to Love



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■ The Big Idea

When two people come together in love, they necessarily bring their own personal life approaches to the relationship. If these approaches diverge or are rather different, couples may have problems with each other.

Through establishing a greater understanding of ourselves and our partners, better communication, and commitment to actively seek mutual development, we can and should harmonize our separate approaches to realize our relationship dreams and goals and live every moment to the full.

Why You Need This Book

Learn to Love provides a guide to the essential ingredients of a successful relationship – kindness, empathy, respect, honesty, intimacy and passion – and also offers invaluable and realistic advice on how to experience the joys of a relationship and work through the difficulties.

The book provides a specially devised program, consisting of ten practical yet inspirational relationship strategies, to transform love life forever. It gives concrete advice on sustaining the initial excitement, discovering confidence needed to take things to the next stage, and developing ways to enjoy a sense of contentment in the security of a loving and strong partnership.

The Relationship Recipe

Relationships need the right ingredients in order to be successful. While there is of course lots of scope for individual variation, there are basic principles of balance and flavoring, and tried-and-tested ways to get all these ‘ingredients’ to come together nicely.

Here, then, are the ‘ingredients’ for a good relationship.

Love

The human capacity for love is our greatest gift; mutually felt, it binds people like nothing else. Loss of this intensity is enough to bring a relationship to an end.

Two people can have very different perceptions of love and can thus express their responses in different ways. This is why it is always helpful to explore and establish exactly what is meant by ‘love’. We need to be clear about what our expectations of love are – both our own and our partners’.

Four patterns of love relationships exist:

1. High passion with low intimacy or commitment is romantic love.
2. Fluctuating passion with high intimacy and commitment is mature love.
3. Intimacy with little passion and commitment is characteristic of open relationships.
4. No intimacy or passion and commitment is empty love.

Passion

This is a state of mind and not an emotion; a driving force that heightens all emotions. It can either be unhealthy (as in crimes of passion) or healthy (when

positive emotions bringing a couple together are intensified). It most often manifests itself as a surge of sexual attraction.

Intimacy

Intimacy is not simply sexual. It also includes shared moments of deep affection or connectedness, during which partners are intensely aware of each others' presence. Moments become intimate when experiences are shared, when partners are exceptionally open to one another, and when there is a sense of physical and emotional ease. Partners can become so intimate that there are few taboo subjects for conversation.

Commitment

Commitment is vital to the survival of a relationship. If couples do not pledge time and support to one another and eschew long-term intentions, the relationship is likely to perish early and/or only bring them hardship.

Trust

Trust involves a willingness on one side to be dependable; and on the other side to be dependent. It is a feeling that needs to be built up in a relationship. The longer partners are together, the more they learn about each other and whether they really can be trusted or not. Trust has to be earned.

Empathy

This is the ability to identify completely with the feelings of the other person without being consumed by them. It is a vital ingredient in a successful relationship. The person's emotions have to be recognized for what they are; the other person's shoes must be stepped into so as to discover where the emotions come from; and the emotions have to be identified with as well.

Truthfulness

With strangers or mere acquaintances, truthfulness can be hard. Even outgoing people can and do wear masks with others to seem more impressive or likeable. But we must choose truthfulness with our partners in everything we do or say to fully know them.

Kindness

Kindness is closely linked to happiness: the kinder one is, the happier he will be. It can be described as the ability to embrace all parts of ourselves warmly, and by doing so, to do the same with all parts of the world. We must be kind to our partners – to give what is meaningful and deserved without counting the cost.

Respect

An underpinning of respect allows love to grow and flourish. Respect is an acknowledgment of a partner's positive qualities. It is rooted in the way one treats

oneself – if one has low self-esteem, true respect for others is difficult to muster, because one is always going to compare oneself against one's partner.

Peacefulness

A relationship should offer a refuge and form a bulwark against all the pressures – work, social, financial – from the outside world. Peacefulness is associated with contentment, freedom from stress, and freedom from interference. It is a quality found within oneself rather than within external circumstances.

The Art Of Positive Realism

To be positive means to use the power of hope to effect real change; and being a realist entails living one's life as it really is – facing difficulties and fully enjoying one's love bond. Here are some points:

- The state of a couple's sex life is often a barometer of their relationship in general. When they are happy, sexual relations between them are good. But when they are sad, their sex life often suffers as well. It must be realized that as a relationship matures it is normal for sex lives to settle down and the need for sex to decrease.
- It's important not to "live" in the future or the past, but to enjoy the experience of life as it is in the present, in the here-and-now. Focusing on the present in a state of "mindfulness" can enrich all areas of our lives, especially our relationships.
- Partners may need to make conscious choices about values by exploring both their own and their partner's values. Discovering the differences between values, and finding an acceptable compromise, is an integral part of being realistic about one's relationship.
- Gender issues can be a source of conflict with one's partner. Stereotyping and consequent 'assigning' of gender roles may have been constantly rejected in our growing years, but may still be embedded deeply in our psyches.
- One of the most rewarding ways to share time with someone, especially one's partner, is to move forward in step – to explore new ideas or activities, to build on mutual enthusiasms, together. It might seem daunting to take on new interests in today's fast-paced and hectic world, but relationships that are locked into routines have little room to grow.
- People in healthy relationships accept each other's personalities as they are. The realistic way to have a harmonious life together is to try to

understand and appreciate your partner's personality as well as your own, and to change lifestyles to accommodate significant differences.

- We all have a tendency to blame others when things go wrong. Because our partner is closest to us, he or she often takes the blame. However, we are responsible for our own actions, and both partners are equally responsible for the success or failure of a relationship.
- The ever-changing weather of emotions can be one of the most difficult aspects of a relationship. Partners need to learn how to deal with emotional peaks and troughs, as these are part of daily life. Part and parcel of this is learning how to read one's partner's body language – and to make sure yours is not offensive.
- Controlling anger is vital. Partners must learn how to deal with the intensity of their feelings in a way that minimizes the effect on their partners. A good way to deal with a situation that is spiraling out of control is to walk away.
- Jealousy must be tamed and/or eliminated as well. This is the fear we feel when we perceive that someone else has, had, or might one day have the affection of our partner. In other words, it is related to loss or the fear of it.
- One's fears must also be overcome. At some stage in the relationship, fear in one form or another is likely to surface and undermine happiness, such as fear of rejection or abandonment, commitment, and violence.
- When you share your living space with your partner, it is vital that you both feel completely comfortable with how your home is put together and organized. This way it becomes a place where your relationship can grow and flourish.
- Be realistic about what you want and how your life is progressing. The pursuit of fantasies can lead to unhappiness, whereas joy and peacefulness greet us when we accept the gift of the moment – even when it presents us with big challenges.

Relationship Strategies

Here are ten strategies that will enable couples to transform their lives together, and give new insight into how to develop individual potential.

- 1. Closeness.** This is more than just physical proximity; it's the feeling that you can be wholly yourself in your partner's company, that just being together has natural positive value. Closeness takes many forms:

physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social. You can build closeness by touching more frequently.
- 2. Appreciation.** Knowing we are appreciated can be the difference between being happy and being unhappy. Appreciation has two components: knowing the worth of your partner and expressing gratitude for that worth, and for the gestures that accompany it. Do this by appreciating everything in your life together.
- 3. Compassion.** This is a cornerstone of many of the world's spiritual traditions. It is one of the great transformative human emotions because by showing compassion we transcend the constraints of ourselves. We must always make sure to be more compassionate to our partners.
- 4. Honesty.** While many people agree that honesty is vital to a relationship, few couples are rigorously honest with each other because they can be ashamed or embarrassed about certain things. What holds people back from being totally honest is fear. So we must always make sure to work things out properly and be honest always.
- 5. Dialogue.** It takes effort and discipline to learn the skills of constructive dialogue. But we must master them because they are at the heart of any successful relationship. There are two skills to learn here: deep listening (stilling your own mental chatter and focusing entirely on what your partner has to say) and straight talking (refrain from using language that blames or confronts him or her).
- 6. Vision.** It is important that as early as possible in the relationship, it is determined whether your visions are compatible with one another. You need to make sure that you are headed in the same direction as partners. Define what you both mean by "the future" and work out a meaningful vision and personal dreams.
- 7. Time.** Every couple can benefit from an audit of their time. A form of time management can be beneficial. Keep separate time journals for a week in which you record what was done each day, from waking to bedtime. Compare the total amount of waking time spent together and decide what you feel would be a healthy balance.

8. **Freedom.** This is a touchy issue even in the best relationships, because commitment really does lead to a voluntary restriction of liberty. But it is a necessary thing because people do need space and time to grow as individuals. Never let the fact that you are in a relationship, hold your growth down. Ask for space even when you feel you need no permission, and negotiate even when you feel you have an absolute right.
9. **Play.** This is a source of happiness, excitement, and lightheartedness – and yet adults don't play nearly as much as children. Aim to establish a witty, freewheeling, gossipy, spontaneous exchange of conversation that is peppered with humor. Inject playfulness into even the most mundane tasks, like dishwashing for instance.
10. **Surprise.** It's good to have order and stability in a relationship, but caution against becoming too predictable. Give your partner constant surprises that break you out of your usual routine; do something different and enjoyable together.

Twenty Exercises

Here are twenty exercises to boost and bolster the lessons taught in all the previous sections.

1. **Make an intimacy barometer to show the level of closeness in your relationship.** Assess on a weekly basis (for two weeks) – take note and see if each of you showed kindness toward each other, shared thoughts or feelings or emotions with each other, helped each other with certain things, and if you felt at ease with each other as well. Sit down at the end of each week and discuss.
2. **Gain a clearer insight into each other's thought processes.** Sit down together and take time to observe your partner's face and body to find clues to their inner feelings – are they worried, sad, happy, tired? Gently offer your observations to your partner and ask him or her to confirm your guesses. Aim to become more sensitive and astute regarding how he or she feels.
3. **Try to peel away any masks you might both have.** Sit together and spend a few minutes deciding which of your daily masks you most often wear for each other. Imagine how this mask would look like if you could walk into a store and buy it. Then take some paper and draw this mask on it. Cut it out and attach pieces of string to it; wear it and talk about what you feel. Then compare notes – talk about misunderstandings and how to solve them.

4. **Perform conscious acts of kindness toward your partner.** At least thrice a week, find an opportunity to be kind to your partner without them being aware of your intention – help them out without letting them know that you are helping. Don't draw attention to your own virtue or achievement. Plus, the next time you feel frustration or anger rising due to something your partner says or does, nullify the anger by breathing deeply and appreciating your partner's unique inputs into the situation.
5. **Spend a peaceful quiet time together.** In a quiet room, sit side by side either on chairs or cushions on the floor. Rest hands on thighs and breathe deeply. Close your eyes and focus your awareness on your body. Focus on your breath, flowing in and out. Open the attention to sounds around you. If thoughts take you away from the present, let them go and focus on your breath again. Feel yourself relax.
6. **Open yourself to what you are doing, no matter how ordinary.** When you are alone, enjoy the rightness of whatever you are doing – namely the fact that you are doing something constructive and necessary. Be aware of your movements as you work, and bring your mind back to the job at hand if your attention wanders. Do the same when you are together – become intensely aware of being with your partner and enjoy the moment.
7. **Confront your stereotypes.** List down what men and women normally and don't normally do, what you like and dislike about men or women, and what they ideally should and shouldn't do. Compare notes with your partner and see how you can modify your expectations so you can live more harmoniously together.
8. **Streamline** your goals. Find a quiet place where you can lie down or sit and relax. Focus on your breathing for 2 minutes to relax and center yourself. Next, think about the hopes and desires you want to be rid of. Imagine you are holding a number of colored balloons, each of which represents one of these attachments. Imagine releasing them one by one. How does that make you feel? Finish by spending 2 more minutes thinking about your plans for your future together and how you want to realize these.
9. **Work on a breathing exercise together to improve closeness.** Lie on a bed or on the floor, face up, while your partner lies at right angles to you, resting his or her head on your stomach. Both relax and slow your breathing; synchronize your breathing for 5 minutes. Switch places. Compare notes on your experience. Was the exercise difficult or easy? What was it like? Do this whenever you are feeling distant from each other.

10. **Learn to become more constructive.** Refrain from criticizing your partner to his or her face for a week. Establish guidelines together – no name-calling, for example, or put-downs or sarcasm. Silence negative thoughts about your partner by focusing instead on a positive quality. Pay your partner a compliment or praise him in some way, at least once daily. Look out for small things they do and express appreciation. Compare notes after the week and see how your appreciation for each other has changed.
11. **Try to experience how life feels like for the other person.** In a quiet, private area, sit comfortably opposite each other. Pick an emotionally charged experience to recount, something that happened outside your relationship, and discuss primarily your emotional reaction to the experience. Swap seats and try to reproduce, as closely as possible, what you just heard – even the tone of voice and posture of the speaker. Describe the feelings you experience. Then reflect on how it felt to “be” your partner.
12. **Learn to speak the honest truth.** Sit side by side and decide on a past disagreement that still produces an undercurrent of tension. Let one of you go first, and talk about your own experience. Mention only the emotions; do not blame your partner. Swap roles and listen to your partner’s dissection of the same disagreement. Discuss what you have learned.
13. **Learn to walk in each other’s shoes.** Choose a subject that is unrelated to the relationship – something lively, something you enjoyed doing – and let one person talk about it for 5 minutes. When the speaker is done, the other person should take pen and paper and list what he or she thinks are the 5 most important points made. Swap places and compare the points. How well were you listened to? How well did you speak? Discuss ways of improving your communication.
14. **Create a Mind Map of your relationship.** Draw either two hearts or two people at the center of a big sheet of paper. Draw 7 broad wavy lines extending out like branches on a tree and name in bold letters: Commitment, Intimacy, Passion, Interests, Freedom, Finances, Chores. Near the end of each of these, draw two or more branches and develop each ‘branch’ as far outward as you can possibly go. Analyze and pinpoint problem areas with your partner.
15. **Try to realize your short-term visions for your future.** Write down your dreams in a “Visions Book”. Every month, one of you selects a vision from the book, which you then discuss to help decide whether you wish to make it a reality (if not, delete it). If yes, start to create your dream. Choose

- something to represent it – a seashell to represent an exotic holiday for instance – and put it in a place where it's easily visible. Once you're happy with it, once it comes true, move on to another one.
16. **Set aside a regular time to reconnect with your partner.** Sit close together, facing each other. Then look into each other's eyes for a full 5 minutes (set an alarm to sound when it's done). Keep completely silent all throughout. End by hugging your partner and sharing how it felt to be very intimate.
 17. **Investigate the balance of freedom and control in your relationship.** Sit side by side holding hands. Pick a speaker, who starts by saying, "If I had more freedom, I would like to..." and talks for 5 minutes. Mention one cherished and yet possible dream, and one milder ambition. After the speaker is done, take a minute to think about what was said. Then the partner comments freely on it. Swap roles. Discuss the freedoms brought up.
 18. **Experience different modes of play.** Choose pursuits that contrast with your partner's usual activities (something that you know they do enjoy). Then go out and do it! Be spontaneous, relax, and go with the flow. Afterwards, ask for feedback so you can do these sorts of things better in future.
 19. **Take it in turns to offer each other a surprise evening out.** Imagine that your partner is royalty and you are doing your utmost to please and entertain them. Inform your partner in advance what they need to do or wear during the event. Be imaginative in your choice of entertainment, and make sure your partner is pampered all the way.
 20. **Construct a relationship tree.** Get a large sheet of paper and some colored pens. Draw a symbol to represent yourself at the center. Use different colors and write the names of people who are important to you. Place each one at a distance that reflects the closeness of your relationship, and draw a connecting line in between you and them (solid for good relationships, broken for not-so-good ones). Next, put down the names of people who were once close to you but with whom you are no longer close. Wrap up by drawing interconnecting lines between these names similar to the earlier lines. Analyze trouble spots and see if anything can be done about them.