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## The Secrets for a Healthy Relationship

Keep the love you have. Get the love you want.

The secrets for a healthy relationship are pretty much the same for everyone – regardless of background, age, location... The advice also holds true whether you are married, dating, single or divorced. Of course, good communication and realistic expectations are at the top of the list. But, there's more you can do to get the love you want or keep the love you have.

Joshua Klapow, PhD, clinical psychologist and associate professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, shares a few things to help you maintain a healthy relationship.

Chat with an expert - Joshua Klapow, PhD, clinical psychologist...

Q. What is important for a healthy relationship?

For a healthy relationship, appropriate expectations are paramount. We see many couples come into a relationship with expectations that are not realistic for the long run. You also need to understand that your relationship, by definition, must change over time. If you have expectations that things will not change – that it will be how you envisioned – then you set yourself up for failure.

Q. What actions signal it may be time to consider leaving a relationship?

Interaction style. Certain interaction styles are major red flags in a relationship. The most important one, when it comes to communication style, is stonewalling. Instead of engaging in conversation and wanting to work things out when there is a problem – they give the silent treatment. Their actions are saying, "I don't want to talk about this." Or, "I am not dealing with this." This is not bad if this happens only once or twice. But if it is a dominant communication style, the relationship is in trouble.

Another red flag is feelings of resentment or contempt. This is not to say that couples won't argue and have disagreements and be angry. You can be as angry as you want at your spouse or significant other at what they've done or haven't done. But if you're angry with who they are and the type of person they are, the relationship is in trouble. This is characterized by an individual saying "I am upset *because of you*," "I don't like who *you* are," "I am upset for what *you've* done." It doesn't mean the relationship is doomed (if there's resentment and contempt or stonewalling going on) but the relationship needs repairing.

Q. How do couples keep the love alive in a healthy relationship?

If either person comes in with the expectation that things will always stay the same passion-wise, they are setting themselves up for failure. The level of passion they want may not be there in year 10. And the way that you keep that passion, even though it may change in nature, is open communication. You can't just feel your way through, every time, for the rest of your life. Sure there are lots of tips and tricks – spontaneity, date night – but the foundation is knowing how to talk about love and passion, not just act it out and feel it out.

Q. What about those coming out of a divorce or a long-term relationship? How do they find a healthy relationship?

Everybody has their baggage. The baggage you bring affects the relationship and you as an individual. One of the most important things is to know thyself and communicate thyself. If you are coming in with baggage, you have to know what it is and how it creates blind spots. You can't use it as an excuse. Depending on the level of baggage, couple counseling can help. When you start to look closely, you may find it's individual counseling you need for your individual baggage. You can't fix the relationship if you are constantly feeding individual issues. Communicate to your significant other about thyself. Relationships may create a healthy environment to fix your personal baggage, but it is your responsibility to do it yourself.

If you've been in a marriage or a significant relationship ( a year or more), before you get back into another relationship, learn what went wrong in that relationship. Take from the relationship a better understanding of who you are. Individuals who don't examine themselves, regardless of whose fault it was, bounce back into relationships that often aren't successful. Get counseling, psychotherapy or talk to clergy. You need to do some self-examination—what brought you into that relationship and what you do and don't want in the next relationship.

Q. What advice could you give single people?

If you are looking for a healthy relationship, it's a similar thing. You can find it if you know what a healthy relationship is. If you got out of one that wasn't healthy, understand what it is you are getting away from. It's a matter of self-examination. A lot of people avoid it because it is painful.

Q. What is the healthiest way to discuss frustrations or express anger when in a relationship?





There are a few things to keep in mind. When you are having an argument, the point of the argument should be to solve a problem, not to win. Ask yourself, What is the point of what I'm arguing about? What do I want to achieve?

Try not to be a mind reader. Try to express how you feel, what your frustrations are and where you are at, not what your spouse or significant other is thinking and what his or her intentions are. Instead, say, "Here's what you did. Here's how I felt." Another important thing is to monitor the level of anger. It's much better to express your inability to deal with a problem right then if the level of anger is so high that you can't think straight. You can say, "I can't do this. I am too angry right now. I am not capable right now." Arguing may mean putting it on the table until you calm down.

Finally, when you end an argument, try to repair the interaction. You can still be frustrated, mad and disagree. But you can note, "I'm really angry but I still love you. We are still on the same team." It creates a little bit of closure even if the problem isn't solved.

Q. What other advice can you give for maintaining a healthy relationship?

It sounds cliché, but you have to remind yourself that if you are going to be in a relationship, you are in a lifelong marathon. What that means is that there are good days and bad days. Don't be too quick to judge the quality of the relationship with a given interaction or a given bad day.

The other thing is that your relationship with your significant other doesn't release you from your responsibility of being a good insightful individual. What I mean by that is that problems in the relationship can often stem from individuals and have nothing to do with what the relationship can fix. You have to be the best player you can be on the (relationship) team. If you have an injury or an illness, your teammate can help you but can't heal you. A relationship should have two strong insightful individuals, not one.

(Posted in February 2011)

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