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Twelve Helpful Tips for Relationships

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TWELVE HELPFUL TIPS FOR RELATIONSHIPS

Robert W. Hatfield, Ph.D. Clinical Psychologist, University of Cincinnati

(Reprinted from the weekly column in the Cincinnati Downtowner Newspaper.)

What follows are twelve useful rules for couples that are known to be of primary importance to happy, intimate, passionate, and committed relationships. They are derived from research on the 10-15% of couples who have been together for over five years, ...and, who are living the "happily-ever-after" we all hope for. If you can utilize these suggestions in your own relationship, you may be taking a large step toward joining this elite group of loving couples. Sit down soon with your partner (waiting for a time when you both are feeling good about each other) and look over this column. If you find these tips genuinely helpful, I suggest you save this for future reference during those inevitable times when things are not going well in your relationship.

It is easy for most people to be cynical about relationships given the current high rates of divorce and obvious unhappiness that we observe and/or experience. At a minimum, most people probably believe that, in long-term relationships, monogamy ultimately leads to monotony. Although this may be true for a very large proportion of couples, we know that it is not inevitable. Marriage and long-term relationships provide a wonderful potential combination of maximum temptation (for closeness, affection, and passion), maximum opportunities, and the greatest possibility for maximum gratification. While many in long-term relationships may envy their single and uncommitted friends, recent research tells us that those in long-term committed relationships, on the average, have more frequent, more satisfying, and more varied intimate experiences than the single and uncommitted... and even more than those engaged in extramarital affairs. For example, in general, men and women report greater satisfaction with marital sex vs. premarital or extramarital sex. The following is a list of a dozen factors that are now known to be the things that separate the happy from the unhappy couples.

1. PRIORITIES: The happy and satisfied couples make a very clear commitment to each other to make their relationship (including their sexual relationship) good. They give their relationship the time and attention it deserves. They place quality time together at the top of their list of priorities. Other things that demand their time are sometimes cancelled or

delayed. Dinners are sometimes put on hold while they talk or make love. They may be late for a party or work or a visit to relatives. They are careful to arrange weekends or vacations alone... without the children, or friends, or mother-in-law. They sometimes turn down invitations and they carefully examine events or tasks called "obligations."

2. **TIMING:** A good and satisfying relationship can happen only when there is time for it. The current structure of families and the American work ethic conspire to lead us into a predictable trap. Couples put off intimacy and conversation while they "get things done." Cleaning the house, washing the car, talking to relatives on the phone, watching TV, etc. replace the loving behaviors they used to engage in at the outset of their relationship. If anything good happens, it comes late at the end of a fatiguing day, or put off until the weekend or vacation. Happy couples don't stop making "dates" with each other and seize upon expected and unexpected times and opportunities. They make time, take time, and pay a lot of attention to each other.

3. **RECOVERY:** The happy couples are unique in that they quickly recover from arguments and hurt feelings. They have been found to use a method not often recommended by counselors and therapists of the past. They are often able to temporarily put aside relationship problems to experience something enjoyable together. They put off further arguments while they go to a concert, out to dinner, a party, or even to make love. Then, after having a good time, they use these good feelings to quickly resolve issues that unhappy couples spend a lifetime fighting about. The gratified couples try to work on important disagreements ONLY when they are both at their best.

4. **TOUCH:** The happily satisfied couples touch each other a lot. Most of their touching is sensual, but non-sexual and non-genital. They hold hands, snuggle on the couch while they watch TV, hug, kiss, take baths together, give massages, etc. Couples who go days or longer without any prolonged affectionate touch are starting from scratch when they decide to be intimate. Unlike the affectionate couples, they have a lot of work to do to make something interesting happen. Sex is not that much different than daily behaviors for the fulfilled couples, but it is a major shift for the less affectionate pairs.

5. **ROMANCING:** Content couples know the importance of surprise, tenderness, compliments, and special little gifts. (Big, expensive gifts don't predict happiness in relationships, but regular little ones do.) They continue "until death do we part" to behave in a romantic, sexy, and seductive manner toward each other. Touches, unexpected phone calls to each other, candle-lit dinners, naked weekends together, extravagant compliments, flowers and little "thingy" gifts from the drug store, are common events. The gifts and phone calls are especially important since they communicate clearly that, "I am often thinking of you when we aren't together." These couples avoid the deadly danger of taking each other for granted. If they have gone too long being busy with other things, they apologize and do something about it.

6. **ANTICIPATION:** A major feature of actually feeling "in love" is that wonderful sense of anticipation when thinking about our partner. One day a busy executive received an envelope from a messenger. Inside was a note from his wife to whom he'd been married for 19 years. It said, "Wanted... handsome man for a grand night of passion! See you at 7:00 PM!" Also inside the envelope was a room key to a nice local hotel. The man said he got very little work done that day! Happy couples plan ahead and make invitations to their lover. They know the importance of keeping passion alive. They regularly create anticipation by, for instance, phoning their partner at work and making a "hot date" for that evening. They describe their passion and may even offer a "menu" for the anticipated loving event. Contrast this to the typical couple, where the only anticipation comes after he or she says, "Wanna do it tonight?" This category requires regular thought and creativity, but the outcome will usually be more than worth the effort.

7. **PLAYFULNESS:** Happy couples work at their relationships and take them seriously,... but not somberly. They play at making their partnership fun and healthy. They understand the extremely high value of humor and laughter. What other couples react to as tragedies, these couples are sometimes able find humor in. When bed slats break, diaphragms fly across the room, your children interrupt your love-making, it rains on your picnic, etc., these couples respond with "Wasn't it funny", not with hysterics, anger and anxiety. They just do the best they can and understand that they are merely human. They take loving and fun-filled care of "the

child within" themselves and their partner.

8. COMMUNICATION: All studies show a direct association between the quality of a couple's communication skills and the quality of their relationship. They certainly don't always sit around talking about their relationship, but their is an open agreement between them that when something needs to be said, it will. They don't just talk about the problems in their relationship. They spend even more time talking about the things they love about their partner and partnership.

9. SHARING: As an important part of their communication, these content couples share the big, important issues such as dreams and fears. They often tell each other the stories of their lives, sharing their understanding of how their past influences the present. Sometimes the more courageous even share their fantasies with each other.

10. PARENTING: Every study on the topic has clearly shown that there is a reduction in several important areas of marital satisfaction from the birth of the first child until the last child leaves home. Ironically, children are an ever-present danger to the health of your relationship. This is more true today than ever before due to the high number of single parents and blended families, which add other potential problems to an already present difficulty. The happiest couples maintain a commitment that their children are not going to have a large negative impact on their love and romance. They do all they can to ensure that their partner doesn't often feel second to the children (or anything or anyone else). These parents make sure that their children respect their privacy, which happens best when the parent also has respect for the child's privacy. It is almost easy for some of these parents to minimize the negative impact of children on the relationship, because the children are comfortably aware that they are loved, and that mom and dad (or parent and partner) are very much in love with each other. With very rare exception, it is extremely helpful to the child's development to observe regular genuine affection between parents (or parent and partner).

11. EQUALITY: Finally, modern studies have universally demonstrated that the only healthy long-term relationships are between people who feel and are equal. Couples who are attempting to have a 1950's type of relationship in which the man makes most of the big decisions and the woman gets to pick the color of the kitchen towels, are not working in the long term. Regardless of one's opinion of the women's movement, the revolution has already occurred. Those who are attempting to stop or turn back the clock are ultimately meeting with dismal failure. The extremes of relationship power imbalances in which physical and mental abuse occurs are the least successful today.

12. CONFLICT RESOLUTION: Recent research tells us that couples who deal with disagreements by withdrawing, ignoring their partner's feelings, and escalating the intensity of the arguments are heading toward a failed relationship unless healthier styles of conflict resolution are developed. It is vital that the woman send clear (mostly non-verbal) signals about her desires for distance or closeness; and, it is equally important that the man pay close attention to her signals, interpret them correctly, and respond as quickly as possible if the relationship is run smoothly.

As you look over these twelve tips for relationships, you may note that the big secret to a happy long-term relationship is no big secret at all. These things are generally common sense. But the research in this field indicates that, once again, common sense is not always so common. As mentioned at the outset, it is obvious that only 10-15% of couples are able to keep doing most of the things that seemed to come so easily when they first fell in love. For reasons that researchers don't completely understand, this small proportion of couples pay attention to these essentials and keep doing the things which result in fulfilling relationships. These people are exceptional in no other way that we can tell. They are not smarter, richer, better looking, "sexier", or more educated than you. This is encouraging. It says that anyone who is knowledgeable and attentive can have a happy intimate relationship.

12 RULES FOR AVOIDING INTIMACY

Robert W. Hatfield, Ph.D. Clinical Psychologist, University of Cincinnati

Most of the categories and these rules have been suggested by my friend psychology professor (University of California), Dr. Bryan Strong. If you wish to truly avoid intimacy in your "love" relationship(s), we suggest you employ any or all of the following. Of course, if for some reason you wish to have an intimate relationship, you will have to think to do the opposite of these "rules."

RULE 1: Keep quiet! This is the most basic of the ten rules. If you truly want to avoid the slightest intimacy in your relationships, just don't talk! If you can follow this first rule, you'll never have to worry about being intimate again!

RULE 2: Never let your feelings show! Actually showing your feelings is almost as bad as talking about them. If you should cry or show happiness, sadness, confusion, anger, or joy you are giving yourself away and you might be forced to talk. And, if you talk, you might become intimate. So stay alert and hide those emotions!

RULE 3: Always be pleasant! When you are upset or when things are bothering you, it is essential that you smile, make a joke, and be friendly. You'll be surprised how helpful this will be in your quest of avoiding intimacy. Your partner will be fooled into thinking that everything is fine with you and the relationship. And if everything appears to be okay, the intimacy in the relationship will never change.

RULE 4: Never lose an argument! Never, and we mean NEVER, compromise! To do so would indicate you admit that your partner's views are as valid as your own. If you begin to compromise, it will be an immediate admission that you value your partner's feelings, which would be a dangerous step towards intimacy.

RULE 5: Work hard! If you always fill your time working hard at school or on the job others will respect you while you maintain an ideal method to avoid intimacy. It will be hard for your partner to complain that you are ignoring him or her if you are slaving away towards financial success. Of course, after so many hours of hard work, you deserve some high intensity relaxation. We suggest lengthy hobbies such as golf, fishing, or hunting which will keep you away from your partner for long periods of time. Drugs and alcohol can also help you avoid intimacy if you are forced to spend time with your partner.

RULE 6: Never make a mistake! There are few things worse than being wrong! If you admit to being wrong you are vulnerable to displaying your humanity and permitting your partner to be right. It would make your partner think they are as good as you. If you make the mistake of taking your partner's feelings into consideration, before you know it you'll be having an intimate relationship!

RULE 7: Never argue or disagree! If you get into arguments or disagreements with your partner, you are in danger of learning that the two of you are different. If you are different, you will have to talk about your feeling and opinions which may lead to the danger of compromise and intimacy. It is best to conceal your feelings and needs, and continue to believe that you and your partner are the same in every essential way.

RULE 8: Make your partner read your mind! Never tell your partner what you want at the time you want it! When they fail to know what's on your mind, or when they guess incorrectly, you can use this as proof that they don't really understand you or genuinely love you. After all, if your partner really loved you, they should know your feelings and what you want. Not only will this rule prevent intimacy, it will drive your close friends and your lover crazy too!

RULE 9: Look out for number one! Remember that you are the one making all of the sacrifices in this relationship, so insist that yours are the only important needs to be attended to. If your partner doesn't satisfy your needs, then he or she is selfish. You work hard, so whatever you wish to do is okay. Make sure you find a partner who understands that when your needs come first, it will be best for him or her because you will be happy.

RULE 10: Don't turn off that television! Keep the television on at all times... when you are in bed, when you are reading, whenever anyone may want an intimate conversation! This may sound like an unimportant rule, but it will help you and your partner avoid noticing that you have no important conversations. (A bonus tip: Keep the radio or stereo turned up while in the car!)

RULE 11 (Female): Transmit confusing signals to him! The large majority of women are expert at transmitting non-verbal signals to their partner

regarding her desire for him to back away, stay put, or move closer. You can avoid intimacy by sending no signals or mixed signals, which will keep him guessing, ...and, of course, every guess he makes will be wrong!

RULE 12 (Male): Ignore her signals and do what you want! In healthy relationships the man pays attention to his partner, watching for her non-verbal signals, interpreting them correctly, and responding right away. Of course, you need to avoid doing this. Don't pay attention, or if you notice a clear signal from her which conflicts with your desires, just ignore it and go ahead and do what you want. This will guarantee that this "dangerous" thing called intimacy will never develop in your relationship.

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