

Ten Tips for Building a Strong Relationship

When you hear about couples who maintain a strong relationship through all of life's challenges, you may wonder how they do it. Many of them have faced the same kinds of difficulties that can lead to break-ups for other people, such as financial problems, trouble with in-laws, or differences in interests or personalities. But somehow, these couples have stayed together while others haven't.

Every couple is different, so there's no one-size-fits-all formula for a good relationship. But people who've stayed together for a long time tend to have some of the same things in common. Here are ten tips based on conclusions experts have drawn from studying successful relationships.

1. Have a strong commitment to making your relationship work.

Most couples start out with the best intentions, but over time, they begin to give their relationship less attention. They may neglect each other while focusing on their work, children, or a time-consuming hobby. Or they may face new challenges when one or both members retire or experience a major loss, such as the death of a parent. In healthy relationships, both people may experience big changes, but they continue to make their commitment to each other a top priority. This means they can survive challenges like getting older, living on a reduced income, or entering a new phase of life by continuing to provide support to each other.

Staying committed begins with accepting that having a healthy relationship takes work. Problems can occur in any relationship, and both people have to make compromises and adjustments. It's important to accept some difficulties or "rough patches" as normal and inevitable. Instead of trying to pretend that they don't happen, make a commitment to solving your problems together.

2. Think of yourselves as friends, not just as a couple.

Couples who stay together share a variety of activities, enjoy each other's company, show respect and trust in each other, provide support in good times and bad, and don't take each other for granted. And they treat each other with kindness and consideration. Couples who stay together tend to be gentler and more patient with each other—especially when they disagree—than those who split up, research has found. A helpful tip is to schedule a date night on a regular basis.

3. Accept your differences and setbacks.

You and your partner may share many interests, but you probably won't share all of them. One of the challenges as a couple is learning to live with your differences. In the early stages of a relationship, both of you may disagree only on small things. (One of you is messy and the other is neat, or one of you always wants to try new restaurants while the other would rather have a home-cooked meal every night.) Over time, each of you may develop new interests and your differences may become greater. You may also have some disappointments along the way. For example, one of you may not achieve a career dream or earn as much money as you'd hoped. At every stage of your relationship, it's important for both of you to prioritize your commitment by showing one another that you'll love and cherish each other even if things don't always work out as expected.

4. See yourselves as equal partners.

In successful relationships, two people may have very different roles but they see themselves as equal partners. They don't regard one person's views or interests as more important than the other's. Each person feels that they are making a vital contribution to the relationship.

One of the best ways to foster this kind of equality is to ask for the other person's opinion frequently and show that you value it. Work to make joint decisions on big issues—deciding how to save for retirement or how to divide up the household responsibilities—and learn to find creative solutions or make compromises when you don't agree.

5. Pay attention to how you communicate.

Many couples who seek counseling say that their problems include poor communication. It's vital for you and your partner to clearly express and carefully listen to each other's needs and desires. One study found that couples can stay close by spending as little as 20 minutes a day simply talking with each other.

The quality and depth of your conversation also matters. Researchers have found that couples who stay together are much more likely to give each other praise, support, or encouragement than those who break up. Many people in long-lasting relationships also continually show their affection in small ways—saying "I love you" every day, frequent hugs, giving each other back rubs, or a romantic note tucked where the other person will find it. Gestures such as these build intimacy. It doesn't really matter what you do, as long as you and your partner show each other how much you care.

6. Handle disagreements constructively.

Even in the strongest relationships, it isn't possible—or healthy—to try to avoid all disagreements. A desire to avoid conflict can lead couples to ignore problems until they become too big to handle. A healthy argument can help to clear the air and clarify different points of view. Knowing that you and your partner are committed to your relationship will help create a sense of safety in expressing yourself.

Because it's impossible to avoid all arguments, it is important to know how to resolve conflicts and deal constructively with your differences. This means never making personal attacks, which can destroy your trust in each other or chip away at your feelings of being loved and valued. It also means saying "I'm sorry" if you said or did something you regret.

No matter how upset you feel, try to focus on the issues involved in a disagreement, not on who's "right" or "wrong." If you're unhappy that your partner doesn't pay the bills on time, don't accuse them of being lazy or neglectful. Instead you might say, "I'm concerned about how late we're paying our bills. This could affect our ability to buy a house someday." Or, "I've noticed that we've had a lot of late charges on our bills. Let's work together to figure out a better system for making sure these get paid on time."

How you deal with conflict is crucial to your relationship's success. Helpful skills can be learned. If you and your partner have disagreements you can't resolve on your own, talking with a marriage therapist or other counselor can give you ideas on how to handle the issues that are causing tension.

7. Develop a support system.

When they fall in love, many couples think they don't need anyone but each other. In the long run, this usually turns out to be untrue. Maintaining a healthy relationship requires ongoing work and attention, and couples who stay together often need a lot of support along the way. This may come from their friends or family. But it can also come from groups or organizations that reflect their deepest values.

Some couples develop a support system naturally. They may have close families, or they may be naturally outgoing and make friends easily. Other people may need to actively build a support network by making an extra effort to reach out to others. Sometimes you can find support by getting involved in a community group, such as a parents' organization, a neighborhood association, or an athletic team. It's also helpful to take the first step to reach out to others—for example, by organizing a block party or inviting a co-worker who's new to town to have dinner with you and your family.

8. Make sure each of you has some privacy and independence.

In the early stages of a romance, couples may want to do almost everything together. But over time, each person needs room to grow and develop, not just as part of a couple but as an individual.

In practical terms, this means that each member of the couple needs time to be alone, time with friends, and time to pursue personal interests. Spending time away from your partner isn't a sign you're becoming distanced; quite the contrary, allowing each other some independence is a way of giving your relationship "room to breathe" and showing that you respect one another's unique needs and interests. It can also remind you of how much you miss each other when you're apart. Giving each other time for individual pursuits may also strengthen you as a couple by bringing new experiences and new friends into your life.

9. Share rituals and traditions.

Successful relationships commonly involve some cherished rituals and traditions that help to bind a couple together. Some couples share daily rituals, such as eating dinner together, taking a walk, or talking before bedtime, even if one person is traveling and the conversation takes place by phone. Others enjoy weekly rituals such as going to religious services or to a favorite restaurant every Friday night. Still others have annual traditions, such as holding a Fourth of July barbecue or attending a special holiday concert.

These activities help couples to define their values and can become a kind of emotional glue that holds them together. The specific rituals you choose aren't as important as whether yours have meaning and importance for you and your partner. Adapt the favorite traditions of both of your families, create some new ones, or use a combination of both. Make adjustments in these as your needs or lifestyles change so that both of you continue to enjoy them.

10. Have fun.

No matter how hard they work, couples who stay together usually make time for fun. Some set aside one night a week for a "date" with just each other—free of children and technology—even if they just go out for pizza or for a moonlit walk. What you do isn't important; what's important is that you spend time together having fun.

To keep having fun as a couple, you'll need to keep reevaluating your definition of "fun." If you aren't enjoying your life together as much as you used to, you may want to take up a new interest

or activity that the two of you can share, such as a hobby, a sport, or a volunteer project. You don't have to have the same interests, but try to find at least one thing that you can enjoy together. It also helps to maintain your sense of humor and find things to laugh at together.

Most strong relationships include a majority of the 10 characteristics listed in this article. You and your partner can make building a strong relationship a priority by working these concepts into your everyday lives.

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