

Fact Sheet



Links Psychology
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Key ingredients for a great relationship

Long-term, meaningful relationships don't happen easily or without effort, yet many of us go into an intimate relationship expecting a miracle. We look for a soulmate with whom we can feel complete. Sometimes we look at relationships of people around us and they seem near-perfect, and we might think, "They are lucky to be so happy and so close, I wish my relationship was different". Fulfilling relationships have little to do with luck and more to do with a willingness to make the relationship a priority and make a focused effort. The expectation that it must be easy prevents us from taking a proactive approach in trying to identify and implement those ingredients that are essential to maintain a good quality, long-term, intimate relationship.

Whether you believe that your current relationship is particularly unfulfilling or generally pretty good, you can always improve its quality by making some small changes. There is an extensive body of research investigating the ingredients that contribute to satisfying relationships, as well as the things that make a relationship more likely to fail.

In this article we will focus on the seven key ingredients of a successful relationship. We will briefly discuss each area and give practical assessment tasks as well as tips for improving your relationship. Don't you put things off until later when you think you will have more time, energy or motivation? Start today

Ingredient 1: Emotional awareness

People grow and develop in diverse ways. Each partner in an intimate relationship brings to it a different developmental history and life experience. As a result, people acquire, in varying degrees, personal resources and strengths that are essential and necessary to establish and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Remember a relationship starts with you.

Ensure you are satisfied with who you are as an individual, and with other aspects of your life, i.e. physical health, career, education, and interpersonal relationships.

In any relationship, there is a unique combination of individual personal characteristics and levels of emotional awareness. Clearly, this combination may represent personal strengths or enduring vulnerabilities and they can affect the quality of the relationship.

Emotionally aware individuals are less needy, less reactive, and are more accepting of their vulnerabilities and weaknesses. A relationship is more likely to be successful if it consists of two, complete individuals, compared to relationships in which one partner is relying on the relationship to make themselves “whole”. For a successful relationship partners must be equals. A good relationship is not built upon the foundation of one partner feeling like a child and the other feeling like a parent. Only when partners relate as *peers* is it possible to experience mutual respect, sharing, support for each other, and the ability to disagree without the threat of losing the relationship.

One of the difficulties faced in intimate relationships is that opposites attract. We are often fascinated by personal traits or background characteristics in our partner that we, ourselves, do not possess. It is not unusual, for example, for an only child to marry someone from a large family because she is attracted to the excitement and seeming closeness of her partner’s large family. At the same time, he is attracted to her quiet and apparently peaceful family. It may not be long before she is accusing his family of being “overwhelming” and he is describing her family as “too withdrawn.” This is the point at which it is important to stop and recall what brought the partners together. With the help of a qualified psychologist each of us can be more emotionally aware and see the advantages and disadvantages of their own as well as their partner’s traits and circumstances.

Task: Make a list of your strengths and weaknesses.

Do you have more strengths or weaknesses?

What are some of the things that you love about yourself?

What happens when something goes wrong in your life?

Ingredient 2: Family

Families provide an environment and context where we learn about relationships as well as about ourselves. In any relationship, each partner brings to it a unique set of family traditions and values. There could be differences as well as similarities between each partner’s family traditions and values, and couples need to develop a constructive attitude with regards to them.

A qualified and experienced psychologist can help you understand how your family or your partner’s family and cultural background may influence the expression of intimacy, emotion, anger, values, communication styles, and sexual needs.

Ingredient 3: Expectations

Expectations in a relationship are the implicit contract around how partners will interact with each other. We can distinguish between micro and macro-level

expectations—that is, the small and big things that can affect a relationship. Some of the big things are views on divorce, whether to have children, single-earner versus dual-earner partnership issues, equal versus traditional marital roles, views on retirement, and the frequency and type of interaction with extended family members.

On the other hand, some of the smaller things and behaviours that need to be clarified are assumptions about bringing each other gifts, cooking rosters, the sharing of duties in running the household, the sharing of tasks to do with the children, and how recreational activities are chosen. Clarifying and negotiating these issues early in a relationship will enable couples to communicate their needs as situations change while sustaining the health of the relationship.

Task: Think about your relationship goals and write down all the expectations for your relationship considering both big and small things. Once you are consciously aware of your expectations you can then explore whether this with your partner.

Ingredient 4: Commitment

Commitment is essential for the development and maintenance of a loving relationship. Commitment involves giving of our time, energy, and disclosing our needs and wants. Partners who have a collaborative mindset and stand together in times of difficulty are better equipped to deal with the painful experiences that life brings. Two key aspects of commitment are effective problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.

Task: Try and identify things that you and your partner are doing that are eroding the trust and commitment in your relationship.

Ingredient 5: Intimacy

Intimacy is the foundation for the development of lasting bonds in a relationship. While sexual and physical connections are important, they are not the only kind of intimacy in a relationship. Emotional, spiritual, aesthetic, and recreational aspects of life are also areas in which intimacy grows. Without these, sexual intimacy is purely physical and unlikely to sustain a relationship over the long-term. In a truly intimate relationship partners freely express love and affection. The most intimate type of caring behaviour is the expression of mutual affection and sexual activity. It is not unusual to find sexual difficulties as a result of low commitment, mistrust, poor communication, and lack of intimacy

Task: Answer the following questions: How much time are you spending with your partner, versus work and other activities? Do you withhold love or affection as punishment for your partner not pulling his weight around the

house? What things are you doing on a daily basis to demonstrate your love for your partner? What fun things do you do together, such as recreational activities, joint hobbies, family projects, friendship activities and holidays?

Ingredient 6: Communication

There is no doubt that effective communication is a key to maintaining a satisfying relationship. Good communication includes the mutual exchange of positive experiences, humor, and articulating emotions.

Effective communication is a skill that includes active listening, reflecting content and emotion in the message, and assertiveness. A quick assessment of the quality of the communication in your relationship is to see whether you are sending and receiving predominantly positive messages such as compliments, enjoyment, and expressions of love and affection. I

Task: Answer the following questions:

When was the last time I gave my partner a compliment?

List 2 things that you appreciate in your partner.

What is happening for me emotionally right before I raise an issue with my partner?

How articulate am I emotionally?

Happy couples tend to show their happiness with frequent compliments and positive interchanges. Don't assume your partner knows you love, respect or appreciate them just because you have been together a long time. Tell them as often as you can, particularly in relation to specific things (e.g. "I really appreciate it that you always do the washing up without me having to ask.").

It is much easier to have a discussion, and to listen when you are calm. Be very specific when you are describing your feelings or needs. Don't assume your partner knows how you feel, why you feel that way, or what you need at any given time; they are not mind readers!!

Ingredient 7: Conflict resolution

While effective communication helps couples identify and understand their problems, another essential ingredient is the skill of resolving interpersonal conflict. Conflict is inevitable, and in an effective relationship couples must possess or develop problem solving and conflict resolution skills.

Two aspects of conflict resolution are important: (1) joint decision making and basic problem solving skills, and (2) emotion regulation and conflict de-escalation skills.

Basic problem solving requires partners to openly share perspectives and their respective understanding of the problem and to brainstorm and evaluate solutions before implementing these solutions. This is a hard one, but the research says couples who can see their partner's perspective during arguments have considerably fewer disagreements and the disagreements are shorter. Ensure you agree on what you are actually arguing about, and understand that it is not you against each other; it is both of you against the problem. Stay in the present. Deal with what is happening *now*; you don't have to dredge up old baggage.

Remember to thank your partner for completing a task or chore. Even if you think that your partner "should" do a certain task, saying thank you is still appreciated and provides reinforcement so your partner is more likely to do it again (and feel happy about it). Don't be afraid to say, "I'm sorry" This phrase can significantly reduce arguments and help in repairing the connection. Remember that it takes two people to participate in an argument, so apologize for your contribution.

Task: Honestly reflect on how decisions are reached in your relationship around financial matters, the rearing of children, and household responsibilities. Is there a pattern to decision making in the relationship? Does one partner make more decisions than the other partner?

Emotion regulation, the second aspect of conflict resolution, includes identifying emotions, recognizing your own body reactions to intense emotions, and to expand your repertoire of coping skills when you are experiencing intense emotions.

Task: Make a quick personal assessment by making a list of the following: What are some of the things my partner does that gets me upset? What are some of the things that help me to settle down?

In summary, most of these different ingredients constitute strengths to build upon or goals to strive for in a relationship. New married couples or people starting a relationship may want to develop and maintain these seven ingredients to enjoy a long term, intimate, rewarding relationship. Don't wait to start making the changes that you feel will improve the quality of your relationship – A skilled psychologist will be able to further assist you to develop and attain your relationship goals. Seize the day!! Contact Links Psychology on 93545465.