

# EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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## The Lasting Relationship

A SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIP  
TAKES WORK, INSIGHT, AND  
COMMITMENT – AND THE  
REWARDS CAN BE PRICELESS



One hallmark of success in life may be the ability to sustain a long-term relationship. People in lasting relationships tend to live longer and stay healthier. Research shows that they report more happiness in life, more rewarding social interactions, and lower instances of substance abuse. Maybe the most important aspect of living with in a successful permanent relationship is that a person not only feels loved, but also is able to share love with somebody else. Sharing love with a partner allows us to experience trust, nurturance, and a feeling of belonging. When we spend our years with another person we have a feeling of continuity in our lives which may otherwise be difficult to attain.

Society today lacks many of the structural supports that in the past made staying in a permanent relationship easier. The divorce rate has never been higher than it has been for the past several decades. The number of women who raise children alone and the numbers of people who choose cohabitation (living together) would shock our progenitors. We no longer live in a world of the immediate community composed of people with whom we have daily contact – people with strong expectations that a couple would stay together for all time. Many religions, which once extolled the virtue of permanence in relationships, have gone by the wayside. We live today in a society that values disposability rather than permanence. Rather than repairing things, we throw them away – and this way of thinking comes to include our relationships. We have become people who value personal independence instead of long-term commitment.



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A career U.S. Army officer, retiring as a full colonel, Dr. David commanded units of 800 men and women. He headed the U.S. Army's Family Support Center Program at 165 locations world-wide and was chief operating officer of a clinical service in a major medical center.

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When two people first enter into a relationship it is usually *attraction* that brings them together. As the attraction wanes, as it inevitably will for most, the relationship enters a stage where *intimacy* becomes the predominant theme. Concerns about feeling close and secure within the relationship come to replace the initial focus on attraction. And finally a couple enters the stage of *commitment*. They decide that the relationship is permanent and concentrate on ways to work on boundaries, communication, and modes of living everyday in a way that accommodates both their own needs and those of their partner. These can be difficult transitions for most relationships. We sometimes lack the tools for instilling relationships with a sense of true commitment.

Every relationship is different, of course, as different as people are diverse. What works for one couple in achieving permanence will hardly work for another. But let's look at a few helpful techniques used by many couples who have managed to attain successful long-term relationships.

## KEEP THINGS HAPPY



Share your humor and lightheartedness with your partner. Physically and emotionally, one of the healthiest things we can do is to laugh, and to laugh often. Have at least one good laugh every day, and preferably many more. Tell jokes and have a good time together. Share your sense of adventure and positive feelings. Bring out your best qualities and let your partner see them. Take the time to engage in fun activities with your partner. Find ways to enjoy each other's company. Take a walk together and talk, or go to a movie together. Engage in your own interesting activities – and then talk about them with your partner. When we lose our sense of fun and enjoyment on an individual level, our mood is often replaced with negativity and pain – and the same is true within a relationship. Enjoying your partner and sharing good times together increase the chances of having a lasting relationship.

## KEEP THINGS POLITE



One of the first signs that a relationship may be in trouble occurs when the partners show a lack of respect for each other. Relationships that remain stable over time are usually those in which both partners are polite toward each other and maintain good interpersonal boundaries. Successful relationships focus on reducing negativity, and this can include criticisms, mockery, name-calling, yelling, insults, and other demeaning behaviors. Lasting relationships are possible when both partners feel loved, respected, and cherished by the other. Think of the enormous gift you have when another person agrees to spend his or her life with you – your attitude should be one of gratitude and honor. That person deserves your absolute respect. Of course, all of us have our bad days,

and some petty fussing can be expected in even the most stable relationships. Relationship experts say that when the ratio of positive to negative feelings and behaviors is five to one, the relationship has a good chance of survival.

## DON'T EXPECT YOUR PARTNER TO FILL UP THE HOLES IN YOUR LIFE



You are responsible for your own life. A relationship in trouble is often characterized by complaints from one party that the other is not caring enough, doesn't show enough love, isn't strong enough, and isn't responsible enough. The underlying message is this – *"I feel incomplete and I want my partner to make up for what I lack in my own life. I'm going to do everything I can to get my partner to change so that I'll feel better and more complete."* When you think about how hard it is to change your own behavior, consider how hard it is to try to change somebody else! When we feel deficient in some aspect of our own lives, we may put pressure on our partners to be different somehow to make up for our failings.

It is far more productive, however, to look at our own personal issues, to become aware of life's challenges, and to gain a sense of our own competence and empowerment, rather than to look to our partner to "save" us. If your partner is going to change, it is up to him or her to decide to make those changes. And your partner is not going to be perfect – nobody is. When you feel more complete in your life, you will be able to tolerate your partner's own foibles much better. Of course, any successful relationship entails a process of compromise. But there is a big difference between the normal process of compromise and the tendency in some relationships for the partners to force changes in each other to compensate for their own personal deficiencies. Partners in a stable relationship are able to differentiate between the issues that truly need to be worked on and those that should be accepted and tolerated. The real secret to success in a lasting relationship is not so much in finding the right partner, but in being one.

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## BRING YOUR BEST ABILITIES INTO YOUR RELATIONSHIP



A person who has examined his or her own life and has developed skills for living well has a better chance of ensuring longterm stability in a relationship. Research into successful relationships indicates that –

- **Both partners are knowledgeable about themselves and eager to learn about their mates.** When you can approach life openly and objectively, recognizing your own abilities and limitations, you can use this knowledge to enhance the success of your relationship.
- **In productive long-term relationships there is a lot of talking,** not only about personal issues but about ideas, events, other people, and other general information. Both partners are free to communicate with the knowledge that the other is listening and able to engage in a mutual dialog.
- **Both people feel free to disclose personal information.** This is not to suggest that every little issue has to be discussed. Indeed, good personal boundaries characterize the healthy relationship. But partners in a successful relationship have the choice to self-disclose when it is appropriate.
- **The partners are minimally critical of each other's behavior.** The message that comes through in the interaction between stable partners is one of respect, acceptance, and love.

All of these qualities have one thing in common – *they are skills that can be learned.* They are skills that can emerge from a process of self-examination, self-awareness, and self-acceptance.

The notion of a long-term relationship can be intimidating for many people. They may fear that they will lose their freedom, their independence, and their ability to be themselves. They may dread the idea of growing old in a stagnant relationship and never getting to experience their dreams.

But a permanent relationship can be liberating. The successful relationship is one in which each partner

*“I can fly higher than an eagle  
For you are the wind  
beneath my wings.”*

– Larry Henley / Jeff Silbar

has gained a sense of his or her own integrity and uniqueness as a person. They have a feeling of being valued by the other just for being themselves. They know they can achieve their life goals with the full support of the other person. When two healthy people come together and form a permanent relationship, they can experience a sense of love, security, and trust which allows each to soar.

## Is A Long-term Relationship Right for Everyone?

There are many people who live very happy and rewarding lives without a permanent partner. Some live alone their entire lives and some may experience a series of partners. Everything comes with a price, it seems. Although people who live outside of a long-lasting relationship may miss out on some experiences, they can certainly gain in other ways. They can usually travel more, meet new people, pursue their own personal activities, and experience a sense of living their own lives, true to themselves and what they want.

It all comes down to a basic question:  
***Do you have the choice?***

Do you live alone because you choose to or because you have to? Do you have a series of partners because you choose this option, or is it because you keep searching for permanence and have not been able to make it work? Obviously, answering these questions requires a deep and honest look into your life. And even then the answer may not be clear. We tend to rationalize our behaviors. We sometimes do things because we have no other options, and we tell ourselves that this is our choice. But it may not be a real choice at all.

The truth becomes evident when you have deeply examined all of your options and can clearly say that you either choose to be in a permanent relationship or that you choose to live alone or within a series of relationships. This requires an honest look into your strengths and limitations, your life goals, and your essential nature. When you have a solid sense of what you want for your life, you will know whether a long-term relationship is right for you – or not.



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## *How Do I Work Toward a Happy Permanent Relationship?*

A successful relationship depends on two partners who have each examined what they want in life. They trust that they will be able to achieve their own individual life goals with the support of their partner. The success of a long-lasting relationship rests on two people who each have a sense of both commitment to the relationship and their own individuality. They feel that the support, trust, and love they receive within the relationship will enhance them in their quest to achieve what they want out of life.

Achieving this goal requires work and sacrifice, but those who make the investment can reap the rewards.

Here are some steps toward this goal –

- You need to define what you want for your life.
- It is helpful to examine your strengths and limitations, and to embrace them.

- It helps to clarify how you grew up and to identify the life events which have made you into who you are now.
- Good communication skills (such as listening) and life skills (such as flexibility, tolerance, and acceptance) are essential to the process of building a meaningful and satisfying relationship.

The task of learning the skills needed for a successful long-term relationship is facilitated through the help of a therapist. A trained professional can guide you through the various stages of your exploratory journey – providing understanding, objectivity and support in a safe setting.

Know yourself – and then you can know another.



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