

# Self & wellbeing

## Relationships can be a rollercoaster ride. Here are 10 ways to improve loves many ups and downs

Words **MATT & SARAH DAVIES**

When couples get together, there is often the unspoken expectation that you will remain the same as you were on those first dates. An assumption that your level of curiosity, generosity, adaptability and interest will endure, or even increase, throughout your relationship. Even though we all know fairytales are dangerous, there's a pervading myth that we can find our "one" or "soul mate" and have a problem-free happy-ever-after. This belief can create an underlying disappointment where expectations are unmet. In reality, relationships are intrinsically challenging.

We have been together for 25 years and the ups and downs of our journey have taught us not only that these low points are typical, but that the repair process can build trust and deepen intimacy. Through the difficulties we faced, we sought help in therapy, and now we both work as relationship therapists. Here is some of the tried and tested advice we use, as a couple and in our work, to get through hard times.

**1. Who is this person? Your partner is a stranger** Treat your partner like someone you are just getting to know, not someone you already know. Maintain respectful manners and behaviour. Couples, especially those who have been together for a while, can rely on an outdated mental version of the other and are blind to the unpredictable and ever-changing person in front of them. One way to keep it fresh is to cultivate curiosity. Please don't assume you already know everything about them. Become intrigued. Enquire what's important to them. How is the year going for them so far? What are

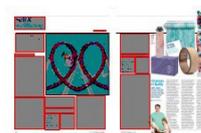
their wishes, hopes and dreams for life? You never really know your partner because they, like you, change from moment to moment. Curiosity makes room for vibrancy.

**2. They are not "The One"** When we think of our partner as "The One", someone we are destined to be with, we want a fantasy of them rather than the actual. When things get tough, which they will, people with this belief are more likely to think they made a mistake in choosing this person and give up on the relationship altogether, to move on to find their "true soul mate". Another way of viewing the relationship is that this person becomes special through the history of the relationship, and you can make your partner precious to you by treating them as someone you love, care about and have fun with. Rather than taking it for granted, you co-create the flavour of the relationship.

**3. Switch the hierarchy** In family life, the hierarchy of needs often starts with the children, the couple and then the partners. Each adult will tend to the children, then each other, before focusing on what they need to feel supported and nurtured. Yet for children to feel the security of the adults in their lives, adults need to tend to their relationship. For each adult to have something to bring to the relationship, they must cherish themselves.

So, the hierarchy should be inverted to have each adult put themselves first, followed by the couple's needs, and the children follow that. Elevating the role of self-care supports each individual, the relationship thrives, and the children feel secure with fulfilled parents.

**4. Three moans a day** If you're a complainer, limit it to three a day. If you avoid saying difficult things, build it up to three per day. Having difficult or direct



conversations can be a healthy expression that helps clear the air. Yet a habitual barrage of criticism, disgruntlement or nagging becomes corrosive. Limit your moans to three a day, and enjoy each one! Like the fairytale of “just three wishes”, your three moans a day can be used wisely. Be discerning. Bring up the issues that are tripping you both up. Face your scandals, which derives from the Greek word for stumbling block. Walking can help to keep things moving along emotionally as well as physically. So go

for a walk with the sole purpose of talking about things you'd rather avoid.

**5. Admit to hating each other** Most people have negative feelings about their partner. You don't like certain habits, styles or values. They grate on your nerves, and it's OK to admit that sometimes you hate some of the things they do. If you trust your relationship enough, you might even admit it to them. Love and hate are two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other. Most people are very averse to admitting to hating things about their partner. But repressing your hateful feelings can lead to bitterness and then closing off entirely and ending up with no feelings at all. Indifference is dangerous. Indifference is the logical opposite of love and is far more threatening than hate.

**6. Mix things up in the bedroom** We all know that novelty is exciting; it can feel exhilarating to be sexy in new ways. Yet, as is human nature, what was adventurous once or twice, by the 10th or 100th time, can get predictable and boring. Sometimes it's the subtle changes, a new location (a different room in the house), a new ambience (lights on or off), or a variation in connecting (keeping your eyes closed or open, talking or keeping non-verbal, whichever you don't usually

do). And more specifically, if you tend to focus on the genitals, then give attention to other erogenous zones of the body. When we try something new, we expand our repertoire, take a risk and explore together.

**7. Play, dance and laugh** How do you play together? When was the last time you busted out your best moves to the tunes on the radio? If it's been a while, it's high time to turn the music up and wiggle that body, or sashay or sway. Be irreverent. Be goofy. Be flippant. Celebrate your playful comedic side in your particular way with whatever you find fun or funny together. We can laugh when we're safe, making us feel safer, so it's a win-win chuckle. Humour can be flirty and intimate, dark or light. It is a shared language that builds a warm, loving connection. The ability to play, dance and laugh

together is the golden glue of relationships when momentarily, the burdens of life are lifted.

#### **8. The space between you**

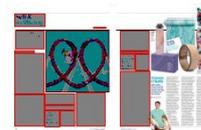
What's the flavour, colour or character of the vibe between you? You know those times when you walk into a room and get a sense of the atmosphere between a couple? What might be the texture or flavour between you and your partner? It can then leap into the imagination to consider how you might

tend to this relationship, this space between you that you create together. Put your focus on feeding your relationship as your support system. Falling in love is involuntary, that magnetic pull that brings you together. Staying in love is taking responsibility for being loving and doing loving actions. It's an “eyes wide open” kind of love. You are choosing to be generous, kind and connecting to nurture the space between you.

**9. Develop selective memory loss** There's an 80/20 rule that if your relationship is OK 80% of the time, then that's good enough. If the other 20% is irritating or disappointing, you can ignore that, forgive or forget and move on. We often look for that 100% person who ticks all the boxes, but it's unachievable. Nitpicking at the 20% can be a futile attempt to change our partner. Criticism is deadly in relationships. Holding grudges fuels bitter resentment, which is isolating and renders us lonely. So, focus on that 80%. Practise finding the positive qualities in your partner, and tell them what you appreciate and are grateful for. Generosity feels good and strengthens the muscle of positivity, laying down memories of the good times.

**10. Leave your partner at home** Go out without them. See friends and cultivate other friendships that don't involve your partner. Social time apart can help you differentiate and stand on your own two feet, in the centre of your life, as an autonomous adult. When we expect our partner to fulfil every role – lover, housemate, perhaps co-parent and friend as well – it can flatten the relationship. The spark fizzles out as there's no space between you, no magnetism. If you tend to enjoy similarity, it might take a bit of a leap to tolerate the fear of difference and embrace those things where you contrast. Embrace difference. Look for it and celebrate it. Expressing your different values, interests, and outlooks can bring your spark back into the relationship. ■

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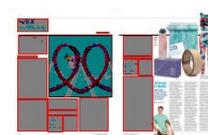




Illustration EVA BEE

