

Couples 101: Tips for Maintaining a Healthy Relationship

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With Valentine's Day being in February, some say that this is the month of love and romance. However, it takes more than flowers and chocolates once a year to maintain a relationship. It can take real work. According to John Gottman, author of *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, there are some basic ways that couples can keep their relationship strong. Here are a few tips to help you along the way:

- **Work together on issues.** All couples have issues. Be they financial, social, romantic, sexual, parenting, etc. all couples will face issues throughout their relationship. It is not the issue but how the couple faces the issue together that determines the success of the relationship. Couples that approach issues as a partnership trying to come up with solutions together have a better success rate than those that try to solve the issue unilaterally.
- **Stop avoiding arguments all the time. (Differences are NOT bad.)** Arguments are inevitable in relationships. They are an opportunity to learn about each other. They are also an opportunity to reduce tension in the relationship.
- **Make rules for having arguments ahead of time.** Discuss the behavior or issue, not the person (e.g. "It frustrates me when you don't keep your promises" versus "You frustrate me"). Monitor the emotional level. Agree to take a break if things get too heated. Keep the discussion focused only on the present issue. Avoid bringing up past issues that may complicate the discussion. Bring up problems gently to foster communication and eliminate blaming. Act as a partnership trying to solve the problem together.
- **Schedule arguments or "feedback moments".** Many of us hold things in until some event or behavior pushes us over the edge and we over-respond in an unproductive manner. By setting aside 30 minutes every week to discuss issues, it is possible to reduce the amount of tension that builds up. This also allows couples to plan what feedback they want to give so it is framed in the most productive manner so that the partner is receptive.
- **Learn to edit yourself.** Do not say every critical thought that comes into your head. Do not confuse honesty with communication. Sometimes it is best to keep quiet to maintain the self-esteem and integrity of your partner.
- **Make positive comments often.** Most couples only communicate when there is something negative to bring up. Successful couples make positive comments more often than negative or critical ones.
- **Accept Influence.** Couples are made up of two individuals with a lifetime of experiences, habits, and customs. Happy couples learn to compromise and come up with new habits and customs together. Successful couples also accept input and influence from their mates when making decisions and plans.
- **Have fun!!!** Maintaining a relationship does not have to be all work and no play. Make having fun together a priority in your relationship. Plan fun activities that break up chores and obligations.

When you would like to learn more about maintaining a healthy relationship, would like to talk to a professional about issues in your relationship or would like to discuss other mental health issues (e.g. depression, anxiety, stress, etc.), please contact me on my confidential voicemail at **(323) 362-6555**.