



Enhancing couple relationships

Reflection guide

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Overview

- Learn to recognize common relationship challenges
- Discuss methods to improve communication and resolve conflict
- Explore ideas on enhancing romance and intimacy
- Identify strategies for building healthy relationships based on trust and commitment

Key takeaways



Main points:



Learning insights:



What areas do I need to improve on?



My action plan:

How healthy is your relationship?

After the honeymoon period ends, many couples begin to take each other and their relationship for granted. We let our jobs, our children or our interests take precedence and let our relationship or partnership slip to second or third place on the priority list. But to thrive, a relationship needs commitment, love and great communication. It also needs constant care and attention.

How often do you :	Never	Hardly ever	Frequently	Daily
Tell / show your partner that you love him or her?				
Show affection to one another, especially through touching?				
Call your partner during the day just to say “hi” or “I love you” or “how are you?”				
Laugh and have fun together?				
Set aside time to discuss things that are important?				
Affectionately tease one another?				
Get away or go on a date – just the two of you?				
Allow your partner to express his or her opinion or make a statement without interrupting?				
Say you are sorry and really mean it?				

How often do you :	Never	Hardly ever	Frequently	Daily
Request your partner's opinion before making an important decision?				
Compliment your partner about his or her personal qualities?				
Ask your partner to clarify when you are unsure what he or she is saying?				
Talk about your sexual relationship?				
Put your partner's needs above your own?				

How did you score?

Did you answer “hardly ever” or “never” to most of the questions? If so, take another look – those questions may offer some guidance to areas of your relationship that you may want to spend some time on.

What are your relationship goals?

What type of relationship do you want? How would you describe your ideal relationship? What are your relationship goals?

Five love languages

Adapted from author and marriage counsellor Gary Chapman's landmark book "the 5 love languages".

Many times in relationships, people can care very deeply about one another and feel that they are communicating these positive feelings effectively with one another. But we usually communicate in the way or style that we like to receive; the problem is that this might not be the way that is meaningful to our partner. We might be speaking in the language of love, but we could be speaking in different 'dialects'. Gary Chapman's belief is that each of us has a main preference or main love language. And most of us actually have a primary and a secondary love language. Here are the five love languages:

Love language #1: Words of affirmation

Simply put, you are communicating affection and love by saying loving things, or words that build up your partner. This may be through verbal compliments, such as "You are a tremendous partner. I am so proud of you. Or, through words of appreciation, such as "I really appreciate you taking out the garbage each week". Or, by verbally encouraging your partner by saying something supportive, such as "If you want to pursue journalism, I think you'll be great at it". If this is your partner's love language, two of the most powerful affirming statements you can use are "I love you" and "I'm proud of you".

Love language #2: Acts of service

This is the love language of people that consider 'doing things' as the primary way of showing and receiving affection. These people show their affection through ACTION. If you find yourself critical of the things your partner fails to do for you, this may be your primary love language. If this is your partner's primary love language, you'll want to understand the things you can do that will please them. Examples can include: 'bringing home the bacon' and providing for the family, taking the garbage out, taking care of general maintenance around the house, getting up at 3am to feed & soothe the newborn baby, painting the guest bedroom, running to the store to pick up a last-minute item, staying up late to help them finish some of their work, dropping some mail off at the post office. Examples are endless - - picking them up at 3am at the airport can be the most romantic thing you can do.

Love language #3: Quality time

This third love language focuses on spending quality time together. The person who craves this love language will spell love “T-I-M-E”. This language is about giving your focused attention to another person. It is not watching TV together, or having a conversation while one person is reading the newspaper. Quality time includes togetherness, quality conversation, quality activity – meaning at least one person wants to do the activity, the other person is willing to do the activity and both people know why you are doing it – to express love by being together. Some people feel that if they stay at work, succeed greatly in their career and provide well for their family this will be celebrated. But, if this person’s partner has quality time as their primary love language, all that other stuff will not matter, because they will simply want their partner to come home and spend some time with them.

Love language #4: Receiving gifts

A gift signifies love because you cannot give a gift without thinking about the person you are making the purchase for. The size or dollar value of the gift does not matter – what matters is the thought that went into securing the gift and the thought expressed in giving the gift. Gifts are visual symbols of love, and these visual symbols are more important to some people than to others. They show that you care, and they signify the value of the relationship. Gifts can be found, made or purchased. Flowers picked by the side of a road, a card purchased on the way home, or a gas stove as a birthday present for someone that loves to cook. If your partner’s primary love language is receiving gifts, it is also nice to know this is perhaps the easiest love language to learn. Make a list of all the things that have excited your partner when received through the years and start practicing without waiting for a special occasion.

Love language #5: Physical touch

Physical affection or touch comes in many forms. Certainly it can be sexual intimacy, but it is also much more than that. It includes hugging, kissing, cuddling, holding hands, giving a back rub, or putting your arm around each other; it need not be sexual in nature. For some people, this is their primary love language and without it they do not feel loved. This doesn’t mean all touches are equal. If your partner’s primary love language is physical touch, you’ll want to learn what makes them feel most loved. They will know best; check in with them and be willing to learn.

Learn your partner’s love language and then express your affection and love for them in their language each and every day

Your emotional love tank

Another of author Gary Chapman's concepts is that we all have an invisible "emotional love tank". And the gauge on our tank may read anywhere from very empty to very full. One way to have a great relationship is to keep making deposits to your partners love tank, to keep it full. The single best way to keep your partner's love tank full is to meet their love language on a consistent, daily basis.

What is your primary love language?

- Words of affirmation
- Acts of service
- Quality time
- Receiving gifts
- Physical affection

What is your secondary love language?

- Words of affirmation
- Acts of service
- Quality time
- Receiving gifts
- Physical affection

On a scale of 1-10, how full is your emotional love tank?

What are 3 ways in which your partner can communicate they love you in your preferred way? (e.g. They could say "I love you", they could have dinner ready at 6, they could hug & kiss me each morning.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What is your partner's primary love language?

- Words of affirmation
- Acts of service
- Quality time
- Receiving gifts
- Physical affection

What is your partner's secondary love language?

- Words of affirmation
- Acts of service
- Quality time
- Receiving gifts
- Physical affection

On a scale of 1-10, how full is your partner's emotional love tank?

What are 3 ways in which you can communicate to your partner that you love them in their preferred language? (e.g. You could say "I'm proud of you", you could give them a massage, you could fix the bathroom light,)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Communication tips

Effective communication is an essential building block to a healthy, satisfying relationship. In relationships that are strained, it is common to find partners saying of each other—“he just doesn’t understand” or “she never hears a word I say.” Such comments point to a need to focus on and improve communication. Here are some ways that you can keep the lines of communication open:

Listen, listen and listen some more.

A first step to understanding our partner is to listen actively. Active listening involves several steps, including:

- Listening without interruption or judgment and by focusing on the speaker rather than your intended response
- Paraphrasing and clarifying. State in your own words your understanding of what has just been said. Ask questions and ask for additional information. Confirm if what you think you heard is what the speaker intended to say.

Timing is everything

- If you need to discuss something important, set aside some quiet time, free from other distractions, to do so. For instance, it’s probably not a good idea to bring up a sensitive issue just before bedtime, or during his or her favorite TV show

Understand the barriers to communication

- At the root of many couples’ communication problems are the unspoken expectations they have of each other. Couples develop communication styles over time; and people have different needs for disclosure and privacy

Learn to accept your differences

- This involves the realization that often what is gained from talking it out is an understanding of your partner, instead of agreement on an issue. Remember, too, that you and your partner may have different styles of communication. Learn your partner’s communication style and you will understand better what he or she is saying between the lines

Talk it out from a position of equality

- Neither partner should be in command or assume the attitude of “I know what is best you do what I say”

Give positive verbal strokes to each other

- Instead of pointing out your spouse’s faults, try complimenting him or her. Everyone has strengths and everyone likes to be validated

If communication problems persist, seek professional help

- Many people do not feel safe enough to express pain and difficulties to their partners. Others avoid discussing important issues, because they fear that they may lose a measure of control. And still others feel threatened by differences of opinion. In cases such as this, it may be necessary to enlist the support of a counsellor to find ways to communicate openly and safely within the relationship. This can be done individually, or as a couple

Resolving conflicts

To develop effective problem solving you need to have a game plan for how conflict will be handled when it arises and work together to make it happen.

Couples need to learn to solve ‘solvable’ problems and the first thing you need to do is stop the cycle of negativity. Author John Gottman offers the following model for resolving conflict:

Soften your ‘startup’

- This means ensuring you don’t start with harsh words. Sometimes, during conflict, one or both partners enter the conversation with a hostile point of view, or believe that it will not be resolved. The conversation may begin with negative or harsh words. But the tone of the startup is usually a strong indicator as to how the conversation will end. Complain but don’t blame and avoid the four horsemen (criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling)

Learn to make and receive ‘repair attempts’

- If you get off track and one spouse becomes defensive, make a ‘repair attempt’ by putting on the brakes and de-escalating the tension before it begins to build. Repair attempts are a fabulous tool that can be used to soothe or calm down a tense situation. They can be an action or statement. A repair attempt could be

making a joke (an appropriate one.) or apologizing for something. A successful Repair Attempt will decrease emotional tension and reduce the stress level

Soothe yourself and each other

- When you argue, your body is in distress, so you need to take time to calm down and if possible, soothe each other. This can mean taking a time out or talking soothingly about how the other partner is feeling

Discuss the problem in its entirety

- Gather information, including not just the facts of the situation but also how you each feel about the problem

Compromise

- Be honestly open to considering your partner's position. Not every solution to every problem will be a 50/50 compromise. Healthy relationships are characterized by the couple's ability to compromise over time in ways that are acceptable to each partner—and leave each partner feeling as though their individual values, beliefs and needs are respected. Unhealthy relationships show one member of the couple always having his or her way most or all of the time. When that happens, equality in the relationship is violated and resentment will build

Follow up and evaluate

- Problems are opportunities for learning and growth. Test your solution for a defined period of time; then follow up to determine if the solution is meeting each of your expectations, whether it's enhancing your relationship as a couple or detracting from it and how you can generalize and apply good problem-solving skills and solutions to other areas of your relationship