

HOW TO strengthen your bond

Words by Caroline Robertson



To love and be loved is life's greatest gift. Relationships can elevate us to happy heights or descend us to depths of despair. Nurturing a healthy relationship with ourselves and others is key to being better together.



Why bother with relationships? It's all too hard. Perhaps it's simpler to live in solo seclusion? Realistically, everyone needs someone, sometime. Even incredibly independent off-the-grid preppers aren't islands. Humans thrive in tribes, whereas extended isolation increases mental and physical health issues. However, unharmonious relationships also wreak havoc in our life. Difficult dynamics not only impact those involved but all those around, including impressionable children. Cultivating skills such as communicating clearly, listening compassionately and resolving conflict effectively are priceless for positive relations.

Unless blessed with exemplary role models, most of us are never taught how to have empowering relationships with ourselves and others. Dealing with difficult relationships requires us to deal with our inner issues also. Once we are aware, accountable and willing to take action, we can turn relationship woes into wins.

Mateship medicine

When we need a pickup, popping around to see someone supportive may be better than popping a pill, according to research. Keeping good company is good for us, according to a slew of scientific studies as follows:

- We have a 50 per cent increased chance of survival with strong social ties, according to a 2010 meta-analytic review, *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk*. Another 2017 meta-analysis, *The Longevity of Social Connections*, established that a supportive social network increased longevity.
- Healthier lifestyle choices such as sound nutrition and regular exercise are bolstered in supportive relationships, according to the study *Healthy Behaviors by Repetti, Taylor and Seeman*.
- High-quality social relationships reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, concluded the study *Social Relationships and Health: A Flashpoint for Health Policy* by William T. Reichman and Michael D. S. Myers.
- Faster cognitive decline was linked to loneliness in a systematic review and meta-analysis by Cathy Cresswell and Sarah E. Malley called *Loneliness and Cognitive Functioning in Older Adults*.
- Relationships assists stress resilience through emotional and practical support, as found in the 2015 study *The Role of Social Relationships in Psychological Resilience*, by Richard J. Davidson and Jon Kabat-Zinn.
- Happier marriages support better health, according

to *Marital Satisfaction and Health: The Role of Support and Stress* by John E. Schulenberg and Julie A. E. L. Beck.

- Firm friendships are associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression and stress, according to *The Impact of Friendships on Mental Health: A Review of Recent Findings* by Laura J. Ellis and Dan P. Brown.

We need to talk

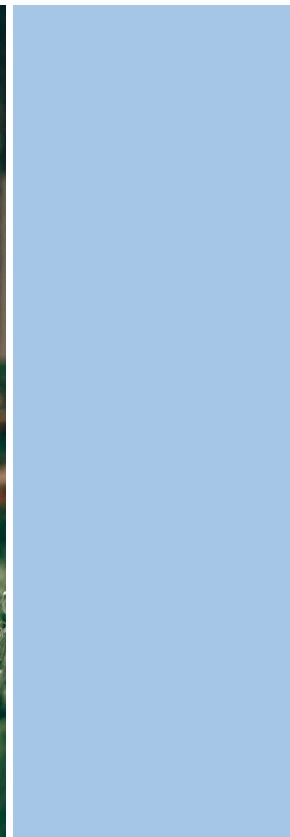
How do you know if your relationship is on the rocks? Poor communication, connection, consideration and effort are major signs that a bond is breaking. If cracks aren't addressed, they develop into major divides, separating people indefinitely. When a relationship isn't working, it's time to work on it, even if only to part amicably. Here are 10 red lights that halt relationship growth.

- Abusive, disrespectful or inconsiderate interactions
- Addiction leading to an inability to relate to others authentically
- Controlling or cruel behaviour
- Distorting the present through the filter of past pain
- Action or communication that is dishonest, ineffective, minimal or superficial
- Emotional and physical detachment
- Lack of accountability, appreciation, empathy, understanding and support
- Misaligned values
- Selfishness
- Unresolved conflict such as fundamental disagreements derailing one's joy

Relationship patterns

It's easy to blame externals when things go awry. Awareness of our contribution to a relationship rift by remaining receptive to feedback, introspective and accountable empowers us to become the change we want to experience. If we all had healthy, wholesome relationships, counsellors would be out of work. Nearly all of us have experienced personal or relationship trauma. This deeply impacts our assumptions, expectations and interpretations of relationships. What experiences marred your view of relationships? Respond to the following after deep reflection.

- How did your childhood caregivers influence your idea of relationships? Ponder if this is a true or distorted perspective.
- Have you perpetuated these patterns in your relationships?
- Write down detrimental traits your main childhood caregiver exhibited and the empowering



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- alternative. For example: Weak – Strong
- Write down issues you experienced with past relationships.
- How did you psychologically or physically contribute to these challenges?
- Write down how you can counter these tendencies. For example: “I lose attraction to their personality and physicality.” “I try to appreciate the good in their appearance and character.”
- What realistic and unrealistic expectations do you have with relationships?
- Do you feel capable and worthy of happy and healthy relationships?
- How is your relationship with yourself?
- What steps could you take to feel capable and worthy of a happy and healthy relationship with yourself and others?

Me before we

Relationships reflect ourselves. The love you receive is a mirror of the love you feel for yourself. Everything arises eventually – our past pain, future fears, our nice and nasty side. Filling one's well with love and acceptance allows us to overflow ambrosia to all relationships. Being OK with ourselves allows us to be OK with others. Establishing a loving relationship with yourself enables loving relationships with others. Barbara De Angelis says, “If you aren't good at loving yourself, you will have a difficult time loving anyone, since you'll resent the time and energy you give another person that you aren't even giving to yourself.”

Reinforce that you *are* enough, you are *doing* enough and you *have* enough. Write down your qualities, accomplishments, ambitions and abilities. If you get stuck, ask others what they admire about you.

Answer these questions to check if you really care for yourself:

- Do you know what you need in relationships and not settle for less?
- Can you accept all aspects of yourself?
- Do you make self-care a priority?
- Is your inner dialogue uplifting?
- Do you follow your instincts?
- Can you list what you have to offer in a relationship?
- Do you allow yourself to speak your truth?
- Do you act in your best interest and maintain boundaries that nurture respectful relationships?
- Do you have fun and pleasure?
- Do you value yourself, your time, worth and contribution?

If you answered no to any of these questions, workshop ways to work on this aspect of self-love. You could try this fuel to fill your love tank:

- Journal to uncover and understand your feelings
- Tune in to a self-love guided meditation regularly
- Identify your needs and make them a priority: nutrition, exercise, work, rest and play.
- Be your own best buddy, enjoying your own company
- Hang out with loving people or pets who lift your spirits
- Do what makes you happy without over-explaining or justifying
- Indulge in fun and play
- Pursue your passions, no matter what others think or the outcome
- Boost your confidence with new challenges
- Pamper yourself with self-love rituals: massages, manicures, you name it!
- Turn comparisons into inspiration and motivation
- Forgive yourself – there are no failures, just stepping stones to success
- Check out your reflection and say something nice
- Set boundaries, saying “no” to what doesn't serve you
- Think loving thoughts about yourself, life and others
- Speak your truth and stand up for yourself
- Celebrate your victories and efforts
- Trust your intuition and believe in yourself
- Treat yourself to a “love me day” and do whatever your heart desires
- Consider counselling if you need extra support
- When judgment pops up, remind yourself: “I'm the best I can be. I love me!”

“To love yourself right now, just as you are, is to give yourself heaven. Don't wait until you die. If you wait, you die now. If you love, you live now.” ~ Author Alan Cohen

Fertiliser for healthy relationships

Relationships flourish like flowers when tended with appreciation, care and positivity. Just like a garden, relationships require special attention through the seasons. The spring of a fresh connection thrives with enthusiasm and energy. The hot summer of passion benefits from cool clarity. Cold winters of disconnection require extra nurturing to keep the love alive with warming support.

Here are some strategies to see through the cold snap to more smiling sunrises. If the relationship is volatile, it may be useful to have an impartial person present to mediate. Try:

- Rather than blaming the other person, note down your role in the relationship rift.
- Try to see things from the other person's perspective.



Reinforce that you are enough, you are doing enough and you have enough. Write down your qualities, accomplishments, ambitions and abilities. If you get stuck, ask others what they admire about you.

- Shift your attitude to gratitude by writing what you would miss about the person and the relationship if they vanished tomorrow.
- In a peaceful, private place when you have sufficient time and energy, take turns to talk honestly without interruptions. Be calm and kind as words have the power to ruin or renew relationships. Jot down notes if you need to recall points. Repeat back to the person what was said in your own words or verbatim. Say, "I acknowledge what you shared as important."
- Take three deep breaths together.
- Try the healing ritual of H'oponopono – an ancient Hawaiian practice that teaches us to be responsible, repent and reconcile. Take turns saying this to each other:
"I'm sorry for (add details). Please forgive me. Thank you for (add details). I love you or I appreciate you."
- On a big piece of paper or board, write down issues and both brainstorm steps towards improvement.
- Each person can declare, "I commit to taking these steps to improve our relationship."
- Write a list of relationship strengths including common traits and interests.
- Write down your differences that are positive
- Share five qualities you love about the other
- Establish your love languages and meet them to the best of your ability.
- Recall happy history together
- Write vows to each other and recite them like you mean them. For example, "I will work on respectful, kind communication."
- Schedule fun time together once a week.
- Try new activities together to strengthen your connection and create shared memories.
- Every evening, share your day's highest and lowest moments.
- Romantic couples can play "taking turns" once a week, requesting an intimate favour from the other, eg "Please give me a foot massage, make me a cup of tea, or hold my hand while we watch a funny film."
- When issues arise, see how your conditioning is contributing to it.
- Cultivate other supportive relationships so you don't depend on one person for everything, and bring fresh energy to your relationship.

- Aim to appreciate, empathise, commit, compromise, defuse discord, respect, serve and subdue stress.
- Align on important life goals, values and aspirations.
- Follow through on your resolutions and celebrate progress.
- Recognise that improvement takes time and persistence.

Should I stay or should I go?

When a relationship gives us more pain than gain, step back, assess and do things differently. *We've got to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em*, as Kenny Rogers sang. Though there are many reasons to end a relationship, the main one is that it's not meeting our needs, instead it's making us miserable. No one deserves to be unhappy. As Robert Louis Stephenson said, "There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy." Ultimately, it's useful to ask yourself, "Would I want to continue a relationship with this person if things never changed?"

The decision to sever any type of tie is very difficult and often wrought with feelings of fear, guilt, anger, shame and grief. Many procrastinate in facing the fact that a relationship isn't working despite efforts through options such as mediation, counselling, quality time together and compassionate communication.

Let's face it, change is scary. Some stay thinking it's better the devil you know than the devil you don't. If new life can't be injected into an undynamic duo, it's time to get one's ducks in line and exit the dead end. Strengthen other bonds and ensure you can meet your needs through ways other than the relationship. When leaving a partnership, ensure you build confidence by pursuing personal goals, secure finances, arrange child support, seek government assistance, ensure housing, focus on career and education.

Mira Kirshenbaum's classic book, *Too Good to Leave, Too Bad to Stay*, offers 35 questions that can help us to decide whether to throw in the towel. You haven't failed, you have simply faced facts and prioritised your happiness above living unhappily ever after. When you struggle with your decision, discuss it with someone supportive. Repeat the incantation, "I welcome this fresh phase. I meet my needs with compassion. I am loving and loved." 🌀

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