

Take Your Relationship to the Next Level

by Charlotte Howard, Ph.D.

John Howard, MA, is a relationship counselor who uses the latest interpersonal neurobiology research and methods. Here he answers questions on how to improve our relationships.



What makes a great relationship?

The biggest difference is whether two people are functioning as one or still operating as two individuals. It sounds intuitive, but it's not. Thinking as an individual is sometimes referred to as living in a "one-person system." When we operate in a one-person system, we lose track of what our partner needs in the moment as we advocate for ourselves. Living in a two-person system requires tracking our own and our partner's feelings simultaneously, and giving equal importance and care to both. It takes paying attention to our partner's face and eyes to make sure we understand what they are experiencing, even as we are discussing something important to us.

How do you know if partners do that well?

Couples do it well when they approach problems collaboratively, like teammates trying to figure something out. Each partner thinks about what is good for the relationship, not just what he or she wants. They prioritize the well-being of each partner in the moment over making a point. Sometimes people point out issues in their partner without trying to be part of the solution. Life together, however, makes us responsible

for helping each other out, especially in our partner's weak areas.

Or, people isolate, retreating into separate corners with their differences. It's better to stay engaged and find a way to be proactively helpful. A two-person perspective uses "we" statements that invite partners to take joint responsibility, rather than "I" statements that emphasize individual views. As an exercise in my office, I sometimes write the couple's concerns on a piece of paper, stick it to the wall, and ask partners to stand side-by-side, holding hands, as they look at and discuss the issue. This practice builds a sense of togetherness around differences.

What is the most needed skill in relationships?

Aside from knowing how to care for yourself and another person at once, it's probably knowing how to soothe your partner. Everyone gets stressed, tired and in funky moods at times. If we're not careful, these states can cause negative behaviors. Pointing the finger when our partner is irrational or unfair isn't helpful.

Everyone should know their partner well enough to soothe them quickly and shift their mood. If you have to ask

your partner what they need, you're already behind the curve. Know the two or three things that calm your partner and do them fast. You'll realize how much power you have to help your partner feel better. A bonus prize: Your value in the relationship goes up the better you get at soothing your partner faster than they can for themselves.

Why are relationships so challenging?

Relationship is a growth opportunity, not just a feel-good experience. We choose partners that can help us grow as people, and like any good learning experience, there are stressful and difficult times as well as easy and fun times as that growth takes place. In addition, our society does a poor job training us for relationship.

Emotional intimacy requires certain skills, such as softness of heart, flexibility of mind, curiosity and attention. We learn many subjects in school, but not how to be in close emotional relationship with others. Families are not always the good example of caring behaviors we wish they were. Early teen and young adult relationships can reinforce immature patterns and non-mutual behavior. Consequently, even when we find a committed relationship, we are often unprepared for how to deal with it, deepen it and continue learning together as a couple.

What's a quick way to improve a relationship?

Research shows that positive interactions outweigh over-processing negative experiences. That is to say, if you and your partner are in a tough spell, get out and play together, don't just talk about what's wrong. Create fun-loving, positive memories. Those go into a bank that counteracts negative feelings. It's important to repair negative emotions, so don't neglect that, but don't overdo it. Healthy couples argue, and patch things up quickly.

What is the best advice you can give to couples?

Form a friendship. Learn how to talk. If you can explore difficult and tender subjects, your love will grow. The more you show vulnerability with your partner, the more chance there is to receive care that gives meaning to the relationship. Don't get caught opposing one another. You

should always feel like you're on the same side because your goals are a win-win interaction for both people every time.

A good relationship should make life better than living alone, so expect being together to be an enhancer. You should strive to feel more authentically yourself and more relaxed when together. Seek out sources of inspiration and learning, like healthy couples or relationship seminars. And consider proactive couples counseling before small issues become big ones, so you can get back to having an exciting, joyful and fulfilling life together.

John Howard is a relationship counselor and spiritual teacher with a private practice based in Austin. He specializes in couples therapy, premarital therapy and helping individuals find a partner. For more information, call 512-469-0535 or visit AustinProfessionalCounseling.com.

Ashtara Sasha White
 offering
PSYCHIC & MEDICAL READINGS with PROFOUND HEALINGS
 Private Sessions • Group Meetings
 Special Events • Read the Testimonials
www.AshtaraSashaWhite.com
 512-278-0559 • Ashtara@SashaWhite.com




FOR SALE MLS# 9750821
162brandingiron.epropertysites.com
7 acres on Creek -Bastrop ~~\$339,500~~ \$299,500

Bamboo & Natural Tile floors **Pecan cabinetry**

2/3 bedroom and 2 baths plus bonus room
1700 enclosed and 1500 covered

- Faswall™ construction • Active greenhouse • Double Roof
- 10ft. wrap porch • 18,000 gallon Rainwater supply system

- Green Architect George Swanson
- Thermal breathable walls and floors
- Permaculture designers/owners
- Custom, natural, organic construction

5-Star Green Energy Home
 Built 2007

La Reata Ranch - Wildlife Subdivision - 11 miles to Bastrop
 Contact Jerome at 830-305-3091 | Jisaacs@cbharper.com

Powerful, Natural Pain Relief
 with Dr. Emu's Rx for Pain
 Enjoy safe and effective relief from:
 Arthritis Pain • Stiff Joints • Cramps
 Knee, Neck & Back Pain • Inflammation & Swelling
 Tired Sore Muscles • Headaches

All-natural ingredients include:
 Certified Emu Oil • Aloe Vera • Herbs
 Vitamins/Antioxidants • Botanical Extracts
 Glucosamine & Chondroitin • MSM

4-oz Spray Bottle just
\$19.95 plus shipping

available online at
NAWebstore.com
 or call us at **888-822-0246**




DR EMU'S RX FOR PAIN
STOPS PAIN PLUS
 PRESCRIPTION STRENGTH
 NATURAL PAIN RELIEF
 CLINICALLY PROVEN
 GLUCOSAMINE & CHONDROITIN
 EMU OIL ALOE MSM
 ESSENTIAL OILS & EXTRACTS
 4 FL. OZ.