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Three Keys to an Amazing Relationship

by John Howard

Amazing relationships bring us joy, ease, security and love. They reduce stress, improve our immune system and help us grow as people. As important as they are, we get surprisingly little training for them. Having a great relationship requires knowledge and skills that may not have been modeled by our families. Three practices can set us on the right course: functioning as one, staying emotionally connected and being ourselves.

Being a great couple starts with functioning as one unit, which is easier said than done. Most of us still operate as two individuals trying to get along. When a couple operates as two individuals, it sounds like two heads of state coming together to negotiate a surrender. Each person represents what they want or need, like a nation fighting for its turf. There's little sense of, "Let's find what's good for both of us."

When a couple knows how to function as a unit, they say things like, "You know, we don't seem to do this very well!" "What are we going to do about this?" "How should we go about getting better at this?" Talking brings them together. Couples that function as one take joint responsibility for feelings in the relationship and solve things together with a spirit of support, cooperation and positivity.

A second key to great relationships is knowing how to stay emotionally connected. Most of our experience of each other (as much as 90 percent by some measures) is happening at unconscious levels of awareness. These unconscious messages are more important than those we are aware of, because they offer a more direct and immediate channel that tells us how safe we are, how trustworthy our partner is and whether we can let our guard down and really connect from a place of truth.

Knowing how to speak directly to this more unconscious part of the brain can help partners stay connected more



often. It works by communicating to the part of the brain that determines threat and safety before thoughts even occur. This form of relating uses physical proximity, touch and tone of voice as primary communicators over words, especially long sentences. Communicating safety and trust nonverbally in this way is a good idea before trying anything fancy, like talking. Hugging our partners after an absence—long enough

to relax our bodies together—helps our unconscious parts (and often the conscious parts, too) feel bonded together. Hugging in this way synchronizes our nervous systems, connecting us at a deep level.

A third key to an amazing life together is being fully ourselves in the relationship. Relationships suffer if we aren't being who we truly are. They become more tedious and take more work, and then even processing the feeling of disconnection can be a drag. Being our true selves is fun and keeps the relationship alive and exciting, especially because as humans, we are constantly changing. The challenging part is being able to be ourselves without hurting our partner or becoming selfish. That requires the delicate art of negotiation.


Emotional negotiation requires that we read our partner, in real time, like a book or a movie. Often, we take a snapshot of our partner and relate to the snapshot, losing our partner in real time as we get engrossed in our own concepts and message. If we stay present, connected, watching the eyes and the face of our partner, we can negotiate true win-win scenarios.

Negotiation also requires that we know who we are and be unabashedly ourselves. No use negotiating if it's for table scraps left over from the dream we once had about a great life. So, we have to be authentic, but also pay very close attention to our partner. If we do this well, we can negotiate a fun friendship that works for both partners, deepening the love and understanding we share in the process.

Relationships are one of the most important aspects of our lives, and are well worth learning the skills that make them amazing. These three keys: functioning as one, staying connected and being ourselves, can take relationships to the next level of love. An amazing relationship pays off in so many ways, from having more fun and excitement to a longer life and happier family members. Learning the building blocks of a successful relationship offers the opportunity to live an awesome love story, and makes the world a better place for everyone.

John Howard, MA, is a couple's therapist based in Austin. His online program to help couples have amazing relationships debuts March 1. For more information, visit ReadySetLove.com.

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