



10 Key Reasons Relationships Struggle and How You Can Avoid Them

How does a relationship go from harmony and feeling connected to having minor grievances, then declining further into disrespect, until it gets to the stage of disillusionment?

When it's finally at this stage, many are ready to walk away from the relationship.

How does this happen?

When I work with a couple and analyse what's going on in the relationship, I find it comes down to 10 core concerns.

1. A couple's attachment style

Basically this means how a couple was raised by their primary caregivers, and whether they felt secure and loved, cared for and connected.

Or whether they felt they had to survive as best they could.

Perhaps one of them felt abandoned, maybe one didn't feel as loved as they needed.

While this is a very a very simple overview, of the messages a young child receives, it has a powerful influence on how people turn up in their relationships as adults.

However, these concerns often don't turn up within the first year to 18 months of a new relationship forming.

How a child was raised by parents/cares influences how they may relate to partners in intimate adult relationships.

If a child didn't feel securely attached in the primary relationship with a parent/caregiver (ie loved, cared for or accepted), they may respond to arguments (as an adult) at a deeper emotional level and rely on old patterns learned in childhood to protect themselves.

The best way to manage this is for the couple to understand what has happened in the past and recognise the old coping mechanisms.

Empathy and compassion is an important skill to bring to the relationship so both feel supported, cared for and loved.

Learning that an argument doesn't mean a partner will abandon them or act out in problematic ways allows for growth and understanding to further develop.

The skills needed to become more secure are:

- Self-awareness of how the protective reaction to arguments (or feeling insecure) began & what it was designed to do (keep the person safe),
- Self-acceptance that they are good enough, lovable and worthy - just as they are, understanding what triggers challenging emotions - this involves understanding where the emotion is coming from (it's part of the flight-fight limbic response) and its protective aim,
- Enhanced communication skills and
- Self-acceptance (among other skills)

There are many good books available about the science of attachment.
This issue is also covered in depth in the online Relationship Hub.

Answer these questions in the editable box below (or print out this worksheet):

- What were your early years like (under age 10)?
- Who were you most close to (mum, dad, grandparent, carer, no one)?
- How would you describe this person - think of at least 5 words to describe this person's character.
- For each word you wrote - think of a specific example that shows what you mean.
- How do you think your adult relationships were affected by these early influences?

What about your partner? Answer the above questions for them (or have them answer the questions if you're doing this with your partner) in the box below.

2. Communication

Being a good communicator refers to how well you relate to your partner during challenging times - especially when things feel personal.

The key here is continuing to communicate openly and with compassion and empathy when arguments feel as if they're getting heated.

When it gets personal, which it can do for the majority of us, it can be quite a triggering thing. What's the one thing you'd like to change about the way you communicate during an argument - or when you feel as if you're being personally attacked (which can often happen during an argument with our partner).

How to improve your communication:

If arguments feel more like personal attacks (which may trigger protective strategies learned in childhood) the primary skill involves separating the issue from taking it personally.

Telling yourself it's not personal is one thing - learning how to regulate challenging emotions involves using self-calming techniques such as breathing, grounding, going for a walk until you're feeling calmer. Think of it like training a muscle - it takes time, repetition and consistency.

In the box below, consider what 'type' of arguments you find personally confronting. You may notice a pattern around feeling belittled, not heard, ignored, shut down, manipulated, coerced or bullied.

3. Managing Stressful Emotions

If a person - or the couple - is struggling to manage stressful emotions, it's most likely that the very oldest part of our brain, the limbic system, is being triggered.

When this happens our limbic system (which includes the amygdala, hippocampus and cingulate gyrus), activates the fight, flight or faint response.

This is normal. It's triggered to protect us in times of threats. It triggers the release of stress hormones which directs blood to our muscles so we can run away, fight or faint/freeze. During these times we're not thinking logically as the blood is directed towards our muscles, not our prefrontal cortex which is designed to solve problems and think logically.

Unfortunately, when the stress hormones produced by the limbic system run amok, we're not often the best version of ourselves - we can end up yelling, leaving or simply not coping.

Not managing highly charged and challenging emotions can create problems within a relationship.

When you're having an argument, how does your body respond. Use the space below to describe what happens in your body - your chest, throat, head, gut - some people describe the blood pumping through their veins as if they're going to burst. What's your experience?

4. Unconscious Habits

Many of us build habits unconsciously that start to put a couple on separate pathways, leading them to feel they're not on the same page or as if they're housemates rather than partners.

The couple starts drifting apart because they're no longer paying attention to each other, or prioritizing the other person anymore.

How to be more present to your partner:

This involves letting go of habits that aren't serving you and starting new habits that will support a more loving relationship.

If on arriving home after a long day at work your first thing to do is switch on the television, grab a drink and flop on the couch to de-stress, your partner may feel ignored, as if they're not important or taken for granted.

Creating a new habit means setting a trigger like once you've opened the door and put down your bag and/or taken off your shoes heading straight for your partner to give them a big hug. This reunion

ritual is very important for a couple to reconnect, show affection and prioritize each other before doing anything else.

There are many habits that could be introduced into your relationship, and possibly some that could be let go.

In the box below, write down some habits that you could introduce that will help you be more emotionally available and present rather than mindlessly absent.

5. Letting Ego Get In The Way

When a person's ego gets in the way, and they prioritize their own needs over the other persons, it means they're operating in a one-person system, not a two person system.

Relationships need a 2-person system to survive and thrive.

If one person pursues their personal needs, wants or desires to the detriment of the other, the relationship will suffer.

A two-person system:

- Prioritizes the needs of both people in the relationship
- Means each person contributes to the safety and security of the relationship
- Offers shared power and equality

Use the box below to reflect on your relationship and question whether you believe you're operating from a 2-person or a 1-person system.

- What specifically are you noticing?
- What imbalances are causing friction?
- How could you meet your partner's needs more?
- How could they meet your needs more?

6. Low self-awareness of personal or partner's needs

Each person in a relationship needs to know who they are as an individual - what 'identity' they're creating, what their personal needs are, what the vision for their life is and their personal value system. Naturally, this means each person has a responsibility to know their partner to the best of their ability.

In this way, each person's needs can be met.

Use the box below to reflect on what you think your partner's needs are.

What are your own needs?

Does your partner know this about you?

How do you let them know what's important to you?

7. Previous Trauma

If previous trauma occurred when a person was young, (or even when older) - it may not take much to activate the trauma again.

It may only take the sound/pitch/tone of a voice, a certain touch or look - or something in the environment to trigger a traumatic memory.

If this happens trauma can flood the body, taking the person from normal and rational to one where the limbic state (the oldest part of our brain) is activated.

When this happens the amygdala releases stress hormones, and the person may feel like they need to shut down, get away from the situation as fast as possible or yell/scream.

Childhood (or adult) trauma can greatly impact a relationship.

If you believe that trauma hasn't been managed, and is still turning up in your relationship, it's wise to seek professional help as there are so many layers to both understanding and managing the long-term effects.

8. Limited Power To Set Boundaries

While few of us would want to wear the label 'people pleaser' - many suffer from this state.

Someone who puts others needs before their own (all the time), doesn't voice their desires, wants to keep the peace at all costs and accepts putting themselves last while everyone else gets on with enjoying life can end up feeling quite resentful to their partner.

Is this the partner's problem? Yes, and no.

Believing your partner is a mind reader who 'should' know what you want won't contribute to a healthy relationship.

People pleasers often struggle to set boundaries as it feels selfish and as if they're exerting their will over others.

They may say to themselves, "Just let the person have whatever they want. Not a problem. Keep the peace."

This is unhealthy for the relationship, and for the individual as stress (and resentment) can build up to the point of manifesting chronic health conditions.

To be more assertive, begin by knowing what you want and asking for it, without following up with an apology.

Being a chronic 'people pleaser' can stem from attachment issues, poor communication skills or lack of self-awareness.

If you see yourself in this scenario (or you see your partner here), begin by building one healthy habit - keep a journal and write down how you feel about yourself. Look at the choices you make daily and ask yourself what the motivation for doing it is - are you wanting to keep the peace, keep others happy, or from a genuine desire to do something for yourself?

9. Misuse of power in the relationship

This may appear in the relationship as one or both acting aggressively, yelling or screaming.

It may appear as manipulation.

It can be passive aggressive behavior.

Misuse of power undermines the other person and creates a power imbalance.

It may be the result of how a person was raised, it could result from poor communication skills, a lack of empathy or compassion, or not feeling worthy.

Power is a complex area.

If your relationship is not on an equal footing, and power is used to control or bully, then this needs to be addressed.

It begins with knowing how you want to be treated.

What respect looks like, and setting boundaries to make sure you're psychologically, physically and emotionally safe.

Use the box below - or your journal - to consider what the power dynamics are in your relationship.

Do you feel safe to raise a topic without being shut down?

Are you able to have a robust discussion without being belittled?

10. No governing principles

This means the couple has not talked about their values, has no vision of what they want the relationship to look like and no idea where the relationship is headed.

If a relationship is hoping to survive on love, or because they have children to care for, these reasons are often not enough to help the couple get through challenging times.

Staying in a long-term relationship means having the tools and resources to pull together during hard times.

A relationship is co-created - to do this, you need to have a discussion around your relational values.

Ask yourselves what is important to you about these values.

Are you prepared to use them as a guiding light?

Consider the long-term vision for your relationship - what do you want it to stand for?

Who do each of you want to be as individuals within the relationship?

What 'family culture' do you want your children to be raised in?

What are the rituals that define your relationship?

How will you prioritize the needs of the relationship?

Use this page to create the blueprint of your relationship.

Include relational values, relational needs, relational culture, rituals, the role of 'interdependence' and your long-term vision for the relationship.