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Seven Ways to Build a Resilient Relationship

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We live in an age when divorce rates have never been higher. Currently in the U.S., one in every three marriages ends within the first ten years. In California, one in every two marriages ends in divorce. How can you avoid being one of these statistics? What can you do to build a relationship that is strong, healthy, and resilient?

Most of us know that, unlike what we see in the movies, “Happily ever after” doesn’t just naturally follow once you have found the right partner. A healthy and happy relationship is the outgrowth of your willingness to spend time and energy creating something wonderful with your mate.

Relationships require regular maintenance. Like your car, you can’t wait until everything breaks down to begin giving your partnership some attention. In my twenty-five years of working with couples, I have noticed that many don’t invest what it takes to keep their relationship healthy and vibrant, until major problems develop. Then they expect to quickly repair years of cumulative damage, when it is often too late.

The key is to invest in your partnership while the going is good. While there are no guarantees, this gives you the greatest likelihood that your relationship will continue to thrive in the years ahead. Here are seven things you can do to begin building a healthy, strong, and resilient relationship today:

Action #1: Demonstrate you care every day.

Love is a verb. It is essential that you *show* your partner that you appreciate him or her on a daily basis. Find out what pleases your beloved, and then do it. Call to say “I love you,” cook a nice meal, clean up the kitchen, offer a back rub, give your partner a break away from the house and kids. Do the little thoughtful things that say, “your happiness matters to me.” Note the emphasis

here is on what you can *give*, not on what you can *get*, and not just once or twice a year, but *every single day*.

Action #2: Have fun together.

It's true: couples that play together tend to stay together. Although this can be particularly challenging when the children are little, it is essential that parents spend fun time as a couple. Make it a priority to carve some couple time out of each week. Avoid discussing problems or focusing on the children while out on your date. This is your time to lighten up and enjoy each other.

Action #3: Let go of the past.

Your partner will inevitably make mistakes, hurt your feelings, do things that infuriate you, and generally behave in ways that you find unacceptable. Your challenge is to avoid keeping score. Once you start holding grudges it is the beginning of the end. Open your heart, let go of any bitterness and resentment you have stockpiled, and forgive your partner for being human. Avoid throwing your partner's past "wrongs" in his or her face. Live in the Now, and let each day be a fresh, new opportunity to demonstrate your love for each other.

Action #4: Bite your tongue.

Should you be tempted in the heat of anger, bite your tongue and stop yourself from saying something hurtful which can create a permanent tear in the fabric of your relationship. Once you have used a negative label like "stupid," or "crazy," or an even more derogatory term to refer to your mate, you can never erase it. These words sting and scar. Vow to yourself that you will never use them, no matter how much your mate has upset you.

Action #5: Listen and Acknowledge.

Listening does not mean you need to agree with what your mate is saying. It only means you put aside your need to be right and win long enough to try to *understand* and *acknowledge* what your partner is thinking and feeling. Try not to give advice or to criticize what you hear. Offer your complete attention, and summarize what you think he or she is trying to tell you, without adding your own interpretation. Problems dissolve when our goal is to listen and understand, rather than to talk and convince.

Action #6: Work on changing yourself.

I can often tell in the first hour whether or not a couple is likely to benefit from couples counseling. It all comes down to how willing each person is to look in the mirror and focus on changing himself or herself. When each is determined to change the other, counseling is doomed to fail. When each is open to accepting responsibility for his or her part in the relationship difficulties, there is a good chance of success. The only one you can change is you. Avoid pointing the finger of blame, and instead place your attention on how you can be a better partner.

Action #7: Focus on what you like about your mate.

Whatever you focus on in another person gets bigger. If you focus on another's faults, they will become predominant in your relationship. Conversely, if you focus on the other's good qualities (as most of us do at the start of a relationship) then they will become prevalent in your interactions. Make a list of all of the things you most appreciate about your mate, and read it daily. Let his or her positive traits be your point of focus, and watch as you literally bring out the best in your beloved.

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