

HOW TO IMPROVE RELATIONSHIPS

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We can improve our relationships with others by being more loving, which requires action. Operationalizing love requires specifying the actions that are needed to act more loving towards others in general and our loved ones in particular.

Strive to be more patient. We live in a culture in which instant gratification is the norm and patience has become an increasingly a rare virtue. Remember the words from a letter of love written long ago: “Love is patient.... Love never gives up; its faith, hope, and *patience* never fail” (I Corinthians 13:4, 7; TEV, emphasis added).

Become more of what we want. We want to be loved, but we often don’t like to do what it takes to be loving. We want to be heard, but we often don’t like to do what it takes to listen. Love is action, not feelings. Rather than focusing on wanting to be loved, we can focus on being more loving. Rather than focus on being heard, we can focus on listening.

Fake it ‘til we make it. We can often act our way into better thinking faster than we can think our way into better behavior. Like developing an athletic skill, learning new behaviors requires us to do something that may feel awkward to do. Like practicing the scales of a musical instrument, learning new interpersonal habits requires practice. Many habits do not become automatic until we practice them hundreds of times.

Learn to say the five most important things. There was once an old sign that listed the most important things a husband should say to his wife when arriving at home. Particularly for a man, it is important to learn the five most important things to say to the women in his life: “I’m sorry... Can I help?... You look great... Let’s eat out... I love you.”

Use “I” rather than “you” language. Questions that begin with the word “you” are often perceived by others as accusations rather than communication facilitators. Rather than making “you” statements, which place blame on the other person, we consider making “I” statements, which place responsibility on us.

Ask “how” rather than “why” questions. Statements that begin with the word “why” are often perceived by others as indictments or blaming statements. Instead of asking “why” questions, consider asking “how” questions.

Change your expectations of others. When we take inventory of our resentments, we often discover that they involve situations in which our unspoken expectations are not met by others. Unrealistic expectations can become *premeditated resentments*. A loving attitude and resentment cannot exist in the same space. To reduce our resentments, we can to change our expectations of others.

Stop stockpiling resentments. When feeling angry about a specific situation, we often tend to bring up a stockpile of resentments from the past. However, throwing in the kitchen sink can bring up the other person’s defenses to a new level. When involved in an argument or conflict, stick to the present issue at hand, and avoid bringing up the past.

Leave some things unsaid. There are some things are best left unsaid. More damage can be done by saying something that does not need to be said than by not saying something that needs to be said. When in doubt, simply listen and learn. No one ever hurt someone by being a better listener.

Listen and learn. Good communication is 90% listening. Because we can't listen and talk at the same time, we can limit our talking in order to listen. Good listening does not involve thinking about what we are going to say next. If we are thinking about what we are going to say next, then we are not listening.

Listen to how you are perceived. According to Columbia University social psychologist Heider Grant Halvorson, Ph.D., the key to self-awareness isn't found inside our heads. Instead, it's found in listening to how *others* see us. The larger the discrepancy between how we see ourselves and how others see us, the worse our relationship with them will be. To improve self-awareness, listen to others.

Think before speaking. When I don't know what to say, I can count to 100. When I do know what to say, I can count to 1,000. Before I speak, a good test is to THINK: Is what I am about to say Thoughtful? Honest? Intelligent? Necessary? Kind?

Consider agreement with criticism. One way we can open channels of communication is to avoid defensive responses. When someone points out one of my flaws, I can avoid a rebuttal by responding, "You may be right." I can also avoid being defensive by using JADE: No Justifying, Arguing, Defending, or Explaining.

Listen to what others say about us. When criticized, there is a natural tendency to respond defensively by denying the matter or offering a counter-criticism. Instead of defending ourselves, we can accept those things that are negative about us. In other words, we accept any kernel of truth in what the other person is saying. If we accept ourselves, we cannot be manipulated by the other person through anxiety or guilt.

Express less criticism and more gratitude. Criticism is often an ineffective way of asking

for attention or love. Rather than focusing on what we want but do not receive from someone, we can focus on what we have and what we have to give. Expressing genuine gratitude is one way of increasing our awareness of that which we already have.

Respond with active-constructive comments. When listening to someone share something, there are basically four ways in which we can respond: *passive-constructive* (e.g., understated support, such as silence or a neutral comment), *active-constructive* (e.g., authentic, enthusiastic support, such as showing positive interest, asking open-ended questions to hear more, and expressing positive emotion or praise), *passive-destructive* (e.g., ignoring the sharing, showing lack of interest, expressing no indication of caring), and *active-destructive* (e.g., criticizing, judging, demeaning, or pointing out negative aspects of a positive sharing). Of these response styles, it is the active-destructive that most readily destroys relationships and the active-constructive response that builds relationships.

Learn your partner's love language. Modern research has confirmed the wisdom of the old adage: "Different strokes for different folks." Learn to not only use the language that you like the most, but use the one that your loved ones can receive the most. In other words, learn to express love the way your partner experiences being loved by you. Five popular languages of love include affirming words, giving gifts, spending quality time, physical touch, and acts of service (Chapman, 1995).

Use the Platinum Rule. The Golden Rule says, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." It is a universal moral principle that is contained in at least 12 major world religions. At the same time, it is often helpful to balance it with the Platinum Rule, which says, "Do unto others as they would have you do unto *them*." What we want for ourselves may not be what others want for themselves.

Pay attention to entrances and exits. When leaving for work in the morning and when returning home in the evening, we pay attention to how we enter and leave. Think of a 3-minute egg timer. A thoughtful comment or a warm embrace takes only a few seconds, yet the effects can last hours.

Avoid harsh start-ups. At the end of a workday, when there are harsh comments, criticisms, or complaints expressed within the first 15 minutes of an interaction with a marital partner, then the interaction usually goes downhill from there (Gottman & Silver, 1999). One way to avoid harsh start-ups is to begin each interaction on a positive note.

Understand complaints, criticisms, and contempt. *Complaints* involve specific statements of anger, distress, or displeasure. Although rarely pleasant, expressing a complaint has the potential to make a relationship stronger than suppressing the complaint. *Criticism* involves attacking someone's personality or character, rather than expressing a specific behavior. Complaints are usually behavioral, whereas criticisms are usually personal (often with blame attached). *Contempt* is a form of verbal abuse that is directed as an attack. Although criticism and contempt are both personal, what separates contempt from criticism is the intention to psychologically abuse or insult someone. Use complaints when necessary, but avoid criticism and contempt altogether.

Always end on a positive note. Professional dog trainers often end training sessions with a reward for practicing a skill with which the dog is able and confident. This dog training principle also works well with humans. In any interaction, find an area of agreement or consensus so that the interaction ends on a positive note. This closing style increases the chance that the next interaction will open on a positive note.

Learn to say you're sorry. Has your conscience ever nagged you regarding some comment you made or action you took? Rather than assuming the incident will eventually be forgotten, here is a simple sentence to use: "I'm sorry." It can be the beginning of a new conversation---or perhaps a new relationship.

Promptly admit when we are wrong. The 10th Step of Alcoholics Anonymous is sometimes referred to as *relationship glue*: "Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." The operative word is *promptly*, because the longer we wait, the more likely we are to begin rationalizing that we are right. Admitting when we are wrong can often go a long way in making things right in a relationship.

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Make amends when we have hurt someone. Whether it is inadvertent or otherwise, hurting someone requires restitution. Admitting when we are wrong may sometimes require an *apology*. There are several components to making an apology: expressing regret ("I am sorry"), accepting responsibility ("I was wrong"), genuinely repenting ("I will not do it again"), requesting forgiveness ("Will you please forgive me?"), and making restitution ("What can I do to make it right?").

Don't take it personally. When our feelings are hurt by someone's thoughtless or rude comment, the comment itself often reflects more about the person who made the comment than it does on us. Although we always need to

consider our own part in any situation, we also remember to use the QTIP: Quit taking it personally.

Mind our own business. In the days of newspapers, advice columnists often received hundreds of letters each week from readers who sought advice about their troubled relationships with family members or romantic partners. Approximately 80% of the responses written by the advice columnists fell in one of two categories: (1) MYOB: Mind your own business, and (2) Are you better with him/her or without him/her?

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Resources updated August 15, 2017

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2009, June 7). Love: A key to better relationships. Retrieved from <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>