

3 Steps to Strengthen Your Marriage or Relationship

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

Couples seek out my services when they're dissatisfied about some aspect of their relationship or marriage. In many instances, small problems have spiraled into larger, complicated ones. (At least the problems *feel* complicated.) Often, my relationship advice is straightforward and simple, even if the problem appears somewhat convoluted.

When a potential solution seems basic, couples often feel hesitant about trying it. If you hold onto the belief that *all* relationship problems are so complicated that they require a host of arduous instructions or years of expensive couples counseling, you might bypass the easiest fix for your particular troubles.

You can start improving your marriage or relationship *right now*, even if you're not having trouble. Incorporate the following three simple steps into the daily life of your relationship. Remember: *persistence* is key. People often try something and if they don't see immediate changes, give up. Give it time and keep at it to reap the benefits of a healthier relationship.

1. What you seek is what you'll find—so seek the positive.

The unpleasant feelings caused by arguments often linger, and unfortunately they linger longer than positive feelings do. This conflict residue creates an atmosphere of negativity that shapes your awareness. You start to notice all the ways in which your relationship is not working. You begin to *expect* problems (very often couples aren't aware that this is occurring). Once this occurs, you will have a heightened awareness of all the problematic things your partner does and therefore you'll miss the potentially positive experiences that may already exist in your relationship.

This doesn't mean that the negative events aren't real. What it does mean is that you will need to fight the tendency to *only* see the negatives in your partner. You'll also need to tune your emotional radar to what *is* working in your relationship—even if only a small percentage of your relationship seems to be OK.

Corrective Action Step:

To accomplish this, start to take notice of several things that work about your relationship. Do this every day. These positive things can be small acts your partner carries out throughout the day, such as warmly smiling at you, expressing gratitude, or starting the coffee maker in the morning. To make this more effective, keep a journal of these experiences. Give this a try for a month or two and notice if you feel closer to your partner.

2. Overcome the Blame-Game

Conflicts are a natural part of all relationships. One reason conflicts arise is that people feel the need to be right (does this sound familiar?). Our ego lends us feelings of superiority and is quick to make hasty judgments about others—including our spouse or partner. For the benefit of your relationship, you need to fight the power of the ego.

Many people are surprised to discover how pervasive the "I'm right, you're wrong" mindset is. The tendency to play the blame-game is reflexive and you may not even be aware that you're a participant of this futile habit.

Corrective Action Step:

The first step is to become aware of all the ways in which you play the blame-game. Become mindful each time you're about to judge your partner or when the impulse arises to put others down so that you can feel more secure about yourself.

The next step is to make a conscious effort to suspend these reflexive judgments. Literally tell yourself, "Stop! My ego is trying to trip me up again by blaming others."

Finally, begin to cultivate a mindset of *acceptance*. Open your heart to the differences that exist between you and your partner and approach them with compassion rather than criticism. This will take time and effort—but these efforts have the double pay-off of making you feel better about yourself and strengthening your relationship.

3. Improve Yourself, Improve Your Relationship

Emotions are contagious. What does this mean for your relationship? It means your feelings will impact your partner and his/her feelings will impact you. For this reason, you might find that you're drawn to people who exude positive energy and you try to avoid negative people.

A powerful and indirect way to influence your partner and affect your relationship is to change how you react to stressful events. Don't succumb to negativity when there is something positive you can take from the situation; don't catastrophize the normal conflicts of your relationship—learn to take perspective. Numerous self-help books are available to help you manage stress and work on your self-esteem. By building a stronger, more confident self, over time you'll begin to radiate an energy that will positively affect your partner and your relationship.

Corrective Action Step:

Reflect on the following questions:

What is your emotional Achilles' heel that prevents you from living a fuller life?

Think about one small self-care step you can take that will get you moving in the right direction?

Author Bio

Dr. Nicastro holds a Ph.D. in psychology and is a marriage and relationship expert. Over the past fifteen years he has helped hundreds build stronger, more fulfilling relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

You can reach Dr. Nicastro via his website <http://www.strengthenyourrelationship.com>