

Relationship Building Blocks: Have You Forgotten the Fundamentals of a Great Relationship?

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

You often hear struggling athletes say that they have to "go back to basics." After years of repetition, it's easy to lose sight of the fundamentals they need to stay on top of their game. Often they need an outsider's perspective (i.e., a coach) to help them determine which fundamentals they've been neglecting.

Many couples fall into the same trap. There are many reasons why relationships lose their footing, but often couples who end up at odds with each other or who finally turn to marriage counseling in a desperate attempt to stop divorce have lost sight of certain relationship basics. And once those basics are forgotten, a formerly solid marriage or relationship is at risk for spiraling out of control.

Let's take a brief look at some of the basics of sound relationship advice. Some of these might sound familiar to you; to keep your relationship healthy, it's often not necessarily a matter of learning new things but *holding onto* tried-and-true wisdom.

Relationship Basics: The 7 C's:

1. Communication

"To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others."

~Anthony Robbins

Marriage and relationship problems often result from poor communication. You don't have to become a chatterbox to effectively communicate. Simply check in with each other once in a while. Find out if the relationship is working for your partner by asking questions like: "How are things between us? Is there something you need from me that you're not getting?" When couples stop communicating, they become roommates instead of soulmates and might ultimately get their needs met elsewhere.

Self-reflection: [Take the time now to think about what you just read and apply it to your relationship by answering the question below.]

How would you rate the communication in your marriage or relationship?

2. Commitment

"Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes; but no plans."

~Peter F. Drucker

Commitment is about hanging in there, through the good times and the bad. Commitment lets your partner know that you are serious about the relationship; it's the foundation that allows trust to develop and intimacy to flourish. Most importantly, commitment allows you to place the relationship above your own needs at times.

Self-reflection:

How do you show your partner that you're committed to the relationship?

3. Courage

"Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage."
~Anais Nin

When you think about your marriage (or long-term relationship), does the idea of courage come to mind? Probably not, since courage is usually associated with extreme acts of heroism. But to have a fulfilling relationship you must also have the courage to contribute something.

What do you need to bring to the relationship table?

You have to bring *yourself* to the relationship. Intimate relationships involve risk and vulnerability, and often couples begin to hide emotionally from each other when the relationship doesn't proceed smoothly. Courage is the act of doing something even in the face of risk and uncertainty. This was evident with a couple I coached: The husband was somewhat subdued with his wife but was "the life of the party" with his friends and other couples. He stopped bringing his sense of humor and capacity for joy into his relationship with his wife after five years of marriage.

Self-reflection:

How do you show courage and give of yourself?

4. Compromise

"The most important trip you may take in life is meeting people halfway."
~Henry Boye

Many couples who end up in marriage counseling have lost the ability to compromise. Relationships, even the very best of them, are complicated and often challenging. Couples who know how to get through the rough patches and still have fulfilling unions know how to compromise. A competitive, "I need to be right" attitude is the death knell to compromise. Practice give and take, and learn how to meet each other halfway.

Self-reflection:

What's one step you can take to improve your ability to compromise?

5. Connection

"For a marriage or relationship to flourish, there must be intimacy. It takes an enormous amount of courage to say to your spouse, 'This is me. I'm not proud of it -- in fact, I'm a little embarrassed by it -- but this is who I am.' "
~Bill Hybel

When you show your partner that you are committed, and that you are working on becoming an effective communicator who is willing to compromise, the basis for a deep connection has already been set. Discover what makes your partner feel close to you and communicate what you need in order to feel close to him/her. Not all roads to connection and emotional intimacy are the same—become aware of and respect these differences.

Self-reflection:

What makes you feel emotionally close to your spouse/partner?

6. Compassion

"Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see."

~Mark Twain

Compassion is the ability to listen deeply and show sympathy and understanding to your partner. Couples who practice compassion and kindness continuously feed love and send each other vital messages of caring. It's no surprise that compassion leads to deeper intimacy and a more fulfilling union.

You would think that it's easy for couples to shower each other with compassion, but this isn't always the case. So often couples begin to take one another for granted and stop behaving in ways that demonstrate unsolicited kindness—a recipe for marriage trouble and relationship problems.

As one husband recently said, "With all the stress I'm under, I don't have the luxury of always being compassionate..." The assumption that you need heaps of time or that you need to be in the "right place" in your life in order to show compassion to others is not only incorrect, it's a dangerous assumption. Make compassion a necessity in your relationship, not a luxury.

Self-reflection:

How can you weave small acts of compassion into your daily life?

7. Companionship

"Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive." ~Anais Nin

Whenever I interview couples who've been together for some time and are content with their relationship, one thing continually stands out as important for these successful couples: They are great friends and they like each other. Frequently, couples forget to nurture this part of their relationship and the cost for this omission is substantial. Friends often have similar interests and engage in enjoyable activities together.

Self-reflection:

Do you and your partner make a conscious effort to play and have fun together?

While there are other important elements that go into creating a healthy marriage or relationship, periodically re-visiting these seven basics will give your relationship the tune-up it needs to stay vibrant and strong for years to come. For added benefit, review these with your partner and see what your relationship strengths are and areas that might need some extra attention. You don't have to wait for significant marriage or relationship problems to arise before giving your relationship the attention it deserves.

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.

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