

How to be a better partner



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Family therapists Jean-Claude Chalmet and Caryn Nuttall say we can all improve our relationships. Here's how . . .

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Don't nag

Nagging is a passive-aggressive way of not tackling the real issue. And the real issue is usually the lack of intimacy in a relationship. When a partner is constantly sniping at the other — “Why did you allow the children to do this? What have you done with this? Why did you put that there?” — it's usually because an underlying resentment is not being addressed. Sex and intimacy is the cement between the bricks of a couple's house. If that crumbles, then the very foundations of the relationship become shaky.

Don't solve every problem

Typically, men assume the role of fixer — although women are also perfectly capable of assuming this role. In a relationship, we want to be heard, understood, and feel that our emotions matter, and this is so much more important to us than our partner briskly providing a solution. With this goal in mind, men sometimes feel they only need to hear a bullet-point summary of the situation, not a ramble. Even if they are smart enough not to say so aloud, a woman can sense their impatience — and it's upsetting.

So while the man is feeling a failure because his solution is crossly rejected, the woman feels frustrated, convinced he doesn't care about her feelings. Frequently women stop talking through problems with partners because of this and confide instead to female friends. But just listening and being empathic can inject a rush of goodwill and warmth into a relationship. A revealing exercise is to repeat back to your partner what you think you've heard. Surprisingly often, what we think we hear is not actually what our partner said. It can take several attempts before what was said and what was heard are in sync.

Take your partner's side

If one partner is upset, no matter how ridiculous you think their reaction, bite your tongue and validate their feelings. Try to show you understand. When someone is brimful of emotion, it's pointless and aggravating to try to reason with them. Save any attempt at rational discussion for when tempers have cooled, when the upset partner might acknowledge that they possibly did over-react.

If we arrive home angry and upset by something that happened at work, for instance, our main requirement from our partner is sympathy. We don't want a solution. We feel hurt, we are desperate to be heard and if we aren't validated we have no place. But the instant we feel understood, we feel like a rational human being again and it's easier to let go of what we were holding on to.

Say sorry — and mean it

It's surprising how many people think nothing is ever their fault. But, if this frustrates you, it might help to understand why your partner finds it so hard to say sorry. If you were brought up in a household where your mistakes were regarded by parents as a natural part of the learning process, rather than unforgiveable wickedness, you will find it easier to apologise than people who were too scared as children to admit to any error. However, once the root of the issue has been assessed, it's important to learn to accept one's share of the blame.

Often, men are willing to say sorry, if it's just a word. Their approach is "Let's say sorry and move on". He feels he's provided a logical solution. But that's not enough for (typically) the woman — unless she has a sense that her partner understands what he's done wrong. What she hears is "I don't give a damn". And it is true that saying sorry is meaningless unless it comes with change. Your partner will only know you are sorry if you don't do it again.

Men often feel they have to be infallible. Saying sorry can feel as if you're letting go of something — often, in women, the need to be seen as perfect — but in any functional relationship perfection is untenable and undesirable. Also, the control someone derives

from never saying sorry makes it impossible for a couple to be a team. A healthy relationship is one where you can share: responsibilities, blame, fault — and success.

Admit your mistakes

When there has been a breakdown of trust, forgiveness can heal the hurt. But it's easier for someone to forgive if the other person acknowledges the hurt they've caused — whether it's an apology for snapping or for infidelity. Forgiveness after an affair is extremely challenging. But it can be made easier if the person forgiving is able to see what part, if any, they might have played in the relationship breakdown.

Affairs never happen on their own. One person will blame the other and fail to see their part in it but, if they can, and they work at it together, the relationship can be repaired. Often, the unfaithful partner can genuinely see what they've done wrong and is full of remorse — but the other can't let go, because it gives such power and control. Some believe once a glass is broken, it can't be mended, but a relationship can come back stronger — if both parties are committed. To repair requires great patience, and courage, but it is possible.

Don't be jealous — change your own situation

A small amount of envy is good, because envy and pride are interlinked. You might envy your partner for being an extrovert, but you also feel an element of pride. However, if it's their situation you envy, then it's your responsibility to change your own situation. Often, with new parents, the woman might feel resentment that her partner has the interesting job and she's stuck at home.

Underlying this is the need we all have for recognition and validation. Typically, the man is lauded for the job he's doing, whereas mothers get little acknowledgement of how good they are. If it's the adult interaction, not the business dinners, and travel, that is envied, find a way to rectify this.

It's normal to feel some envy of what your partner has — their career, their time with the children, their perceived freedom. Withdrawing sex is a typical way of acting out this resentment. But envy is less likely to take root if you think of yourselves as a team. Support and encourage each other. You should never feel that one partner has all the power.

Do not, however, try to prompt envy or jealousy in your partner. A lot of couples confess far too much about their past life. Invariably this is not a good idea. A jealous person is not just jealous of the present, but jealous of the past.

Make more effort

Don't take your partner for granted. Just because you can break wind with impunity, doesn't mean you should. Cheesy as it sounds, the Obamas are wise to insist on a regular date night. Take it in turns to organise them: a meal, a film, or something new and different. If you can't easily get out because of babysitting, make the effort at home. Try getting back in step with each other with a dance night: not only is the physicality of dancing a boost, it is team work.

Don't underestimate the importance of sex

If we had great love-making the night before, it acts as a buffer against any challenges we face the following day. In a long-term relationship, this is easy to forget. And it's all too easy to withdraw sex as an unspoken pay-back for our partner's behaviour. But this can have a domino effect on the relationship with many other problems resulting. Sexual rejection feels like such a profound personal rejection; it makes you feel unlovable. It weakens the entire structure of the relationship and some are tempted to seek validation elsewhere. That said, most couples don't have much sex. Sex is a prickly issue for just about all of us, but it's essential. Forget putting on the washing or scrubbing the floor — sex is more important. Especially when you have children, a warm atmosphere is more important than a tidy home.

DIY can mean "I love you"

Constantly reassure your partner of your love. And understand the way your partner shows love. Many find it hard to say "I love you" but instead try to be reliable, cook sumptuous meals (or even splendid cheese on toast) or do DIY. It is all too easy to overlook that this is our partner's way of trying to engage in the relationship, and instead complain about the constant drilling. But rather than resent your partner for his lack of obvious affection, consider that this may be the main way your partner has learnt how to connect; that building and fixing is his way of taking care of you. We can gain a lot of knowledge as to why and how our partner might show their love from looking at their family.

Know that needing space is normal

One partner might want to be constantly joined at the hip, the other might need more space. It can be helpful to talk through the origins of those preferences, then negotiate. One partner might experience the other as stifling; the other might feel rejected. This can lead to a cooling of intimacy. Talk and listen, explain your point of view, and the situation can be turned around.

Synchronise your financial attitudes

A shared attitude to money is helpful. If one is a spendthrift, the other a saver, understand what has led to this, and negotiate. Some men refuse to tell their wife how much they earn: she is treated like a child, given a bit of money each week. Certainly, if one partner is childish and irresponsible about money, the other should take more control. But unless this is the case, two adults with joint accounts, and no secrecy, is the financial route to relationship success.