

10 Tips for Building a Strong Relationship

Overview

Ten tips for building a strong relationship.

When you hear about couples who maintain a strong relationship through all of life's challenges, you may wonder how they do it. Some of these couples have faced the same kinds of difficulties that can lead to break-ups for other people, such as financial problems, trouble with in-laws, or differences in interests or personalities. But somehow, these couples have stayed together while others haven't.

For a long time marriage counselors and others thought that couples had the best chance of staying together if they had similar backgrounds and interests. But recently, experts have developed a different view. Many people now believe that common backgrounds and interests may be less important than other factors, such as differences in values, how couples handle disagreements, or how committed they are.

Every couple is different, so there's no one-size-fits-all formula for a good relationship. But people who've stayed together for a long time tend to have some of the same things in common. Here are ten tips based on the conclusions experts have drawn from studying successful relationships:

1. Have a strong commitment to making your relationship work.

Many couples start out with a strong commitment to their relationship but, after a while, begin to give it less attention. They may neglect each other while focusing on their work, children, or a time-consuming hobby. In strong relationships both people may have outside interests, but they continue to make their commitment to each other a top priority.

Staying committed begins with accepting that having a good relationship takes work. Problems can occur in any relationship, and both people have to make compromises and adjustments. So it's important to accept some difficulties or "rough patches" as normal and inevitable. Instead of trying to pretend that they don't happen, make a commitment to solving your problems together.

2. Think of yourselves as friends, not just as a couple.

Couples who stay together see themselves as good friends. They share a variety of activities, enjoy each other's company, provide support in good times and bad, and they don't take each other for granted.

3. Accept each other's limitations

Nobody is perfect, and long-lasting couples accept this and learn to cherish each other despite their flaws. One of the biggest challenges you may face as a couple is learning to live with many different kinds of shortcomings. In the early stages of a relationship, both of you may have to accept only small limitations. (One of you is messy and the other is neat, or one of you always wants to try new restaurants while the other would like to have a home-cooked meal every night.) Over time, you may have to cope with larger disappointments -- for example, that one of you has never achieved a big career dream or earned as much money as you'd hoped. At every stage of your relationship, it's important for both of you to know that you'll love and cherish each other even if things don't always work out as expected.

4. See yourselves as equal partners.

In successful relationships, two people may have very different roles, but they see themselves as equal partners. They don't regard one person's views or interests as more important than the other's. Each person feels that he or she is making a vital contribution to the relationship.

One of the best ways to foster this kind of equality is to ask for the other person's opinion frequently and show that you value it. Try to make joint decisions on big issues -- deciding how to save for retirement or how to divide up the household responsibilities -- and learn to find creative solutions or make compromises when you can't agree.

5. Pay attention to how you communicate.

More than two-thirds of the couples who seek counseling say that their problems include poor communication. It's vital to learn how to communicate with your partner so that both of you are able to express your needs and desires clearly. One study found that couples can stay close by spending as little as twenty minutes a day simply talking to each other.

The quality of your conversation also matters. Researchers have found that couples who stay together are much more likely to give each other praise, support, or encouragement than those who break up. Many people in long-lasting relationships make a point of saying "I love you" every day. Others continually show their affection in small ways. They may touch or hug frequently, give each other back rubs, or tuck romantic notes into the other

person's lunch bag or briefcase. It doesn't really matter what you do, as long as you and your partner show each other how much you care.

6. *Develop a support system.*

When they fall in love, many couples think they don't need anybody but each other. In the long run this usually turns out to be untrue. Maintaining a good relationship is difficult enough that most couples who stay together need a lot of support along the way. This may come from their friends or family. But it can also come from groups or organizations that reflect their deepest values.

Some couples develop a support system naturally. They have large and close families, or they're naturally outgoing and make friends easily. If you haven't found a support system this way, you may be able to develop one by making an extra effort to reach out to others. Sometimes you can find support by getting involved in a community group such as a parents' organization, a religious organization, or an athletic team. It's also helpful to take the first step to reach out to others -- for example, by organizing a block party or inviting a co-worker who's new to town to have dinner with you and your family.

7. *Handle disagreements constructively.*

Even in the strongest relationships, it isn't usually possible -- or healthy -- to try to avoid all disagreements. A desire to avoid conflict can lead couples to ignore problems until they become too big to handle. A healthy argument can help to clear the air and clarify different points of view.

Since it's impossible to avoid all arguments, it is important to deal constructively with your differences. This means avoiding personal attacks during arguments or discussions, which can destroy your trust in each other or chip away at your feelings of being loved and valued.

No matter how upset you feel, try to focus on the issues involved in a disagreement, not on who's "right" or "wrong." If you're unhappy that your spouse doesn't pay the bills on time, don't accuse him or her of being lazy or neglectful. Instead you might say, "I'm concerned about how late we're paying our bills. This could affect our ability to buy a house someday." Or, "I've noticed that we've had a lot of late charges on our bills. Do we need to work out a better system for making sure these get paid on time?"

8. *Make sure each of you has some privacy and independence.*

In the early stages of a romance couples may want to do almost everything together. But over time, most couples realize that each person needs room to grow and develop, not just as part of a couple, but as an individual.

In practical terms, this means that each member of the couple needs time alone or with friends away from the other. Allowing each other some independence is a way of giving your relationship room to “breathe” and showing that you respect another’s unique needs and interests.

9. *Share rituals and traditions.*

Almost every successful relationship involves some cherished rituals and traditions that help to bind a couple together. Some couples share daily rituals, such as eating dinner together or talking before bedtime, even if one person is traveling and the conversation takes place by phone. Others enjoy weekly rituals such as going to religious services or to a favorite restaurant every Friday night. Still others have annual traditions such as holding a Fourth of July barbecue or attending a special holiday concert.

These activities help couples to define their values and can become a kind of emotional glue that holds them together. The specific rituals you choose aren’t as important as whether yours have a meaning and importance for you and your partner. You might want to adapt the favorite traditions of both of your families, create some new ones, or use a combination of both.

10. *Have fun.*

No matter how hard they work, couples who stay together usually make time for fun. Some set aside one night a week for a “date” with each other even if you just go out for pizza or for a moonlit walk. What you do isn’t important, what’s important is that you spend time together having fun.

In order to keep having fun as a couple, you’ll need to keep re-evaluating your definition of “fun.” If you aren’t enjoying your life together as much as you used to, you may want to take up a new interest or activity that the two of you can share, such as a hobby, a sport, or a volunteer project. You don’t have to have the same interests, but try to find at least one thing that you can enjoy together.

Most strong relationships include at least some of the 10 characteristics listed above. You and your partner can make building a strong relationship a priority by working these tips and characteristics into your everyday lives.