



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #2:

LOVING, HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

This month, many people celebrate love and romance with flowers, dinner out, jewelry and candy. These tokens and gestures have become symbols that our modern culture associates with expressions of love.

While they offer an instant feel-good boost, it's also important to have perspective that the feelings they generate can be fleeting.



We sometimes need to be reminded it's the intangibles -- trust, respect, caring, honesty and patience -- that are the hallmarks of healthy relationships.

It's the ability to cultivate these, not only in those relationships, but within ourselves that creates positive mental health. When aligned, we can experience profound positive emotion that can affect our moods, our happiness, our interests and our overall energy.

What makes a relationship healthy?

The early days of a relationship are generally filled with hope and optimism. With time, and as the relationship progresses, you will begin to develop a vision of what the future may bring. Sharing thoughts and ideas about your relationship allows for development of common understanding and support. Listening and reciprocating allows for new thinking and new relationship goals to be introduced.

Proof that love is blind

The expression, "Love is blind," first appeared in the Middle Ages in works by Chaucer and Shakespeare to describe the euphoric feeling that develops with new love that sometimes makes people overlook things in their relationships that they might normally be more sensitive to.

Modern researchers at University College in London, England have even published studies proving that, "...feelings of love lead to a suppression of activity in the areas of the brain controlling critical thought."

In a 2004 study published in *NeuroImage*, neuroscientists used MRI technology to scan the brains of participants and record different brain responses triggered when they viewed photos of people they knew. Their findings proved that on seeing people they were familiar with, their brains produced a pleasant reward response like what would be produced if the participant were eating or drinking. But when participants viewed a photo of someone who they were romantically linked to, the study recorded heightened brain activity in the hypothalamus -- an area of the brain that controls feelings of arousal.

The study suggests that we allow ourselves to become more vulnerable when we fall in love. In turn, our brains suppress or reduce the need to assess character and personality, granting almost implicit trust, respect, caring, honesty and patience.



Making time for what is important to thrive as a couple

Couples need to make time to be present for each other. Doing favourite activities together, or exploring new ones is an important aspect of helping relationships grow. Be aware of how demonstrating affection for one another can be as simple as taking time to come together through simple touch – like holding hands, rubbing tired shoulders, or an embrace. Again, be present for each other, and not preoccupied with what “everyone else” is saying.

If a relationship has progressed physically, each partner’s sensitivity to the other’s likes and dislikes becomes important as well. Trust, respect, caring, honesty and patience all factor into developing and experiencing healthy sexual intimacy. Discussing each other’s preferences, desires, interests and needs helps make a relationship stronger and rewarding. This can be a wonderful aspect of your relationship that can lead to many positive results both mentally and physically. The most important thing is that you take time to explore it together.

Being kind to yourself, preserving your individuality

Have you ever wanted to do something you enjoy but have been too apprehensive to let your partner know because you think that he or she may not like it? Did you change to be more aligned to who you thought your partner wanted you to be? If yes, these are classic cases where your individuality may have been put at risk or sacrificed. Often, couples become so entangled in a created identity, their identities as individuals suffer. Understanding how you trust yourself, show self-respect, and practice self-care demonstrate emotional awareness and maturity. Having the ability to be honest with yourself, as well as developing patience for yourself, are other important ways to ensure you preserve your individuality.

Above all, realizing and embracing self-worth is a critical element of being able to thrive as a person first, but also a person who brings unique value to another as one part of a relationship. The notion of self-worth is different from self-respect and self-esteem. It honours the individual and helps inform choices a person makes. Someone can have high self-esteem, and can demonstrate self-respect, but still have low self-worth. Sometimes this leads people to make choices almost unconsciously because they feel societal pressure overrides everything else.

Healthy Relationship Do’s and Don’ts

DO think about how you communicate, not just the fact that you are communicating. Does your partner like face-to-face conversation or would they want to hear periodic updates throughout the day? Get creative – brief video chats or text messages can be a great way to stay connected.

DON’T overdo the contact though. A partner who wants to keep in constant contact is exhibiting a breakdown of trust and potentially respect.

DO listen to understand, not just listen. When your partner is done speaking, show that you heard the conversation by asking a few questions about the topic. If you can’t think of a question, restate a bit of what your partner has just said.

But **DON’T** interrupt. That’s a sure way to damage respect and show impatience.

DO be aware of how you choose to respond to an impromptu question such as, “How do I look in this?” This is a tricky one. It’s a time when your partner is looking to you for approval and a boost of confidence. Look at him or her and provide a thoughtful and confident response. Be honest, but recognize that sometimes an affirmation can be more constructive.

DON’T ignore or delay your response or offer criticism. This is a lesson in learning how to interpret when your partner is feeling low and needs a positive, caring response.

DO be kind to one another. That’s a best practice for anyone you interact with, but this is especially important within a close relationship. Your partner may be experiencing something significant in his or her life that is wearing on their usually good nature. Being aware of influences in your partner’s life can help you to understand these interactions and not take them personally. Also realize that sometimes being unkind is an indicator that the relationship may have run its course.

DON’T stay in any relationship that affects your self-esteem through constant negativity, hurtful communications, or abuse. If your partner is abusive – either physically or emotionally - seek information and support from a family member or close friend, local shelter or community information centre, your doctor or local hospital.



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