

Don't Let Relationship Strife Jeopardize Your Health: Six Simple Secrets for Making Things Better By Ellyn Bader, Ph.D. and Peter Pearson, Ph.D.

A strong, long-term relationship contributes greatly to your health—lowering blood pressure, reducing your risk for heart disease...even extending your life expectancy. But intimate partnerships are not easy. In fact, many of the efforts we make to maintain harmony may actually undermine a relationship.

Good news: By recognizing key patterns, you can escape six common relationship snags...

Trap: Avoiding necessary conflict. Some couples are so afraid of fighting that any doubts, unspoken wishes or frustrations get pushed underground. Instead of confronting issues head-on, one or both partners may make accommodating statements such as, “Anything you say.”

Solution: Recognize that conflict is inevitable. Accept that your partner will become upset during these times, but don't let that derail you. Let your mate see that there is a reason for what you're saying, that it's hard for you to say, and that you won't dismiss any hurt or inconvenience your partner may experience.

Trap: Losing your identity. It's common to become so involved with your partner's life that you lose touch with what's important to you. Watch for subtle clues, such as a queasy stomach or shoulder tension. These can be warning signs that you are losing sight of your desires.

In a healthy relationship, each person holds strong views and interests. In fact, there's nothing wrong even if partners disagree about important issues, such as where to live or whether to have children. These can be tough—even painful—discussions, but they are necessary. When couples struggle through disagreement, they understand and appreciate each other more deeply.

Solution: Stay focused on your desires, values and beliefs. Express differing views about small issues, such as food or movie preferences. The more practice you have with small things, the easier it will be to take on big things.

Trap: Forcing agreement. Like animals locking horns, some couples get stuck in quarrels. Unable to abide even trivial differences, they try to browbeat each other into doing things “my way.” Telltale behaviors include bickering, blaming, holding onto grudges and passive-aggressive ploys, such as saying you'll be on time but arriving late.

Solution: Stop trying to win arguments or assign blame. When arguments occur, don't allow them to escalate. Use a time-out if the discussion becomes overheated. If arguments are a problem in your relationship, sit down with your mate at a time when you're getting along and make a list of what is and isn't acceptable to say. This provides a safer, more predictable structure for arguments.

Trap: Feeling threatened by change. At some point in most marriages, one partner may want to explore other interests, such as new friendships, sports or creative projects, away from his/her mate. This is healthy. It prunes both partners for growth. However, the partner who is not pursuing a new activity may get anxious and try to reel in the mate. This only creates more tension.

Example: Rick turns 50 and starts training for a marathon. His wife, Jan, thinks, “He's getting

into shape and looks great. I won't be interesting to him." She dissuades him from running by saying, "I'm not sure you're healthy enough to do this."

Solution: Talk things out. The person pursuing a new interest can describe why it is important to him. His mate can explain why she feels threatened.

Occasionally, your mate may want time alone to pursue other interests. While you're apart, maintain your connection with voice mail, email, notes or letters.

Trap: Detaching from your mate. Some couples begin living parallel lives and take increasing liberties with finances and personal decisions. One partner may detach from the relationship, with the other person seen as a mere obligation or inconvenience. This sets the stage for extramarital affairs, financial subterfuge, chronic lying, etc.

Solution: If you've strayed from the relationship, own up to your actions. Otherwise, You'll never fully regain trust. Acknowledge your partner's anger. You may fear it, but you can't simply persuade your mate to let it go. To take responsibility for what happened, you should admit what you did, express your feelings about your actions, and acknowledge the impact they have had on your mate.

If you're the aggrieved party, ask yourself if you want to salvage the relationship and examine your own role in what happened.

If you or your spouse has had an extramarital affair or committed some other serious betrayal, consider getting help from a marriage counselor. Ask friends or a clergyperson for a referral.

Trap: Making it impossible to be honest. You may inadvertently stymie your spouse's efforts to be truthful by acting confused, going on the attack or withdrawing after hearing bad news.

Example: Your spouse might ask, "What time will you be home for dinner tonight?" When you respond, "Eight o'clock," your spouse might say, "Why don't you value having dinner with the family?" The implication is, "I don't like your answer. Now tell me what I want to hear."

Solution: If you think you won't like what your partner has to say, examine why. Assure yourself that you can handle whatever your mate says and that you will have a chance to reply and get clarification.

During difficult conversations, try to see things from your mate's perspective. Ask questions. Make sure you understand what's being said by repeating what you've heard. In order to have an honest relationship, hearing the truth is as important as telling it.