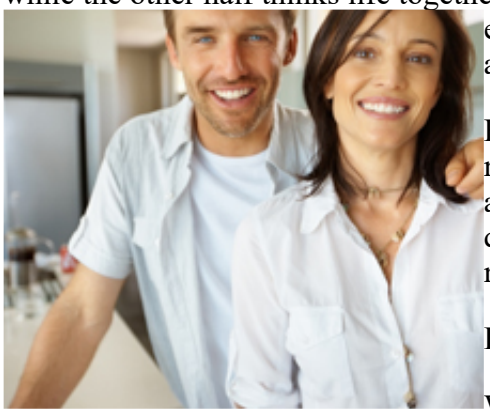
Working at it: keeping your relationship relevant

You can usually spot a new couple from a mile away. They look impossibly happy, relaxed, touchy and in love. One half of the couple expects the other partner to always be this romantic, attentive and charming while the other half thinks life together will continue to be this carefree, fun and interesting. They both envision a life with successful careers, a love-filled commitment, a pet and maybe even children.



But as time wears on and the hormones of early love wear off, the routines, challenges and stresses of daily life can all start to chip away at a rock-solid partnership and make it vulnerable. And in a world of quick-fixes and instant everything, it can be easy to forget that relationships take a lot of patience and hard work.

Learn to live happily ever after

When divorces and breakups are more common than "happily ever afters," it can be difficult to know what it takes to have a successful relationship. While every couple is different, follow these basic tips to help you keep your relationship alive and well:

Find a balance. Many couples become completely absorbed with each other and end up shutting friends and family out. This kind of self-isolation can cause real problems down the line when the "honeymoon" phase is long gone. Both partners should maintain relationships with friends and family, develop their interests and hang on to their personal independence. When you work on developing yourself, you have more to teach the other person. This will add layers and depth to your relationship instead of leaving you feeling trapped and uninspired.

Be nice. You've probably caught yourself treating your partner impolitely or taking them for granted. Instead, try treating your other half the same way you would your closest friends—with respect, patience and affection. Use the words "please" and "thank you" and be aware when you unintentionally come across as rude. If the phone rings instead of saying "get that will you?" say, "would you mind getting the phone please?" A simple change in your tone and the way you communicate will go a long way to keeping your relationship in positive territory.

Avoid the words "never" and "always." "You never take out the garbage," or, "you *always* make a mess"—sound familiar? These words point to blame and criticism, both of which can negatively impact a relationship. If you're trying to resolve an issue that won't seem to go away, try to re-phrase the way you approach it. Just by saying, "it really upsets me when…" you will significantly improve the way you connect with your partner and prevent them from feeling backed into a corner.

Don't expect the other person to change. You started dating your partner for many good reasons. If you try to mould and morph them into the person you want him or her to be, then you're going to cause some serious resentment. While you can help to bring out the best in your mate, first and foremost, learn to accept your partner as they are.

Pick your battles. To make a relationship work, you need to learn to distinguish between what issues are worth discussing and others that are better off ignored. If you find yourself annoyed, stop and take a second to ask yourself how important this issue is and whether it's worth fighting over. You'll notice less negative energy, reduced stress and you'll actually end up liking each other more. If you do end up in an argument you should also learn to accept an apology, admit when you're wrong and let things go.

Up the effort. With kids, careers and hectic schedules, most couples don't spend enough time together and fail to show their appreciation. Do the things you used to do when you were first dating. Show genuine interest in each other's day, give a gift for no reason at all or put a nice note in your partner's lunch.

Set aside a bit of time each day and at least one night a month for uninterrupted conversation and quiet companionship. Ban talking about your kids, finances or other points of business and even try dressing up for each other.

Seek help. If your relationship is in trouble and these suggestions aren't working, it's time to bring in the professionals. Counselling can help you identify and fix problems and provide you with strategies to improve how you communicate with one another. Seeking professional help is also a great way to maintain a happy relationship and prevent problems well before the going gets tough.

Happy couples are realistic about the day-to-day difficulties of committed life. They don't expect to be ecstatic one hundred per cent of the time and they certainly don't believe that their partner is solely responsible for their contentment. While it may have started with flowers and chocolate, most healthy relationships continue to thrive after the bouquet withers and the sugar high passes because both partners are willing to roll up their sleeves and do the hard work needed to stay connected and committed to one another.