

5 Strategies for Building Strong Relationships and Avoiding Relationship Pitfalls

Relationships are a key part of the human experience. How we interact with others influences the kind of relationships we build and how capable we feel as a person. Here are 5 strategies to help you focus on building strong relationships that last a life-time:

1. Talk openly about how you feel when the other person says or does something that arouses strong feelings. This applies to both good and bad feelings as relationships flourish when we share the things we like and unhealthy tension can be released when we share the things we don't like. When done properly, talking openly about feelings helps our relationships to grow and provides us with opportunities to practice positive communication.

I often suggest people think in terms of "I statements" even if they aren't comfortable actually using them yet. To think in I statements focus on what you are feeling and why.

i.e. "I feel disrespected (or hurt, angry, unimportant...) when I'm interrupted."
or "It hurts my feelings when I'm cut off in mid-sentence."

Did you know: Starting statements with the pronoun *You* or demanding an answer with *Why*, make people more likely to go on the defensive and less likely to care how it made you feel? i.e. "You're always interrupting me...why can't you just listen!" or "Why do you always do that? I hate it when you interrupt!" Our goal is to share information, not blame the other or provoke a fight.

2. Look for the positives in the other person and make a point of sharing what you see. This can be easier said than done, as it is often the negative things that jump out at us. With practice, however, it becomes easier and when done on a regular basis helps everyone involved. When you point out the positives in another you strengthen your bond with that person and build a positive outlook for yourself. That makes you feel good and contributes to the self-esteem of the person you are complimenting. This results in more leeway when relationship problems arise, because the relationship is stronger and able to handle the stress.

i.e. "I love your sense of humor...you're so creative."
"I feel so relaxed around you – you're so calm and sure of yourself."

When a relationship has been going on for a while or when we are parenting/teaching, it becomes very easy to pick out the things that irritate us and point those out instead. If you can make it a habit to point out two positives for every correction, or critical comment you make, your relationship will still move in a positive direction.

Did you know: When we give in to our desire to point out the faults of others, and see changes in their behaviour, it's usually because we have activated their internal critic? This is that little voice in their head that makes them second guess themselves and feel unworthy or undeserving of whatever good things life throws their way. In many relationships we are feeding the other person's internal critic as we speak!

3. Accept other people for who they are without trying to mold them into the people you wish they could be. This is a tough one for many of us. It is often easier as an outsider looking in, to see where a person needs to personally develop (at least in our opinion). People will develop where they need to when they are ready...and not a moment sooner. If we can recognize this and allow them to grow at their own pace we are accepting them for who they are at that moment in time.

This is not the same as excusing inappropriate behaviours, or giving up on a person as if he is never going to change. By allowing him to be true to himself you actually help him recognize when changes are required. When the person you are dealing with is your child, be there to guide and set boundaries, but accept her just as she is.

Did you know: In almost every case, a person who is forced to change in order to be liked or accepted by another will change back when stressed? When people stay in a relationship because they are in love with who that person could one day become, they are likely to be very disappointed. People will only truly change when *they* believe that they need to!

4. Take the time to have fun in all of your relationships. Whether it is a smile shared with a colleague, a laugh with the neighbor, playing with your child or talking with your partner...all of these things build relationship and help us feel stronger. Once again this sounds easy to do, but often it is not. The stress we feel from a health concern, the worry we have about our child's daycare, the disappointment we experience when we don't get the job—all drain our energy making it hard for us to create quality moments with the people around us. As the tension mounts the more serious we become and the less effort we put into having fun. Laughter, story telling, and having caring conversation are just a few of the things that help to release that tension and replenishes our energy reserves.

Did you know: Although eating right, getting enough sleep, exercising, etc are important parts of healthy living, sometimes a few hours of fun that keeps you up too late (or dips into your health protocol in other ways), will do more to strengthen you than anything else. Positive human interaction strengthens us in ways little else can.

5. Find the time to focus on your own personal development so that you can be a strong, active member in every relationship that you are involved in. To be effective in any relationship you must first be able to survive on your own. This is a HUGE topic that can't be covered fully here, but is too important to leave out completely. A relationship is only as strong as the people involved in it. If you are overly dependent on your partner/friend, indulging in hyper-parenting, or unable to detach from your own parent(s) you will struggle in other areas of your life. A strong relationship is built on independence that becomes interdependent (i.e. the people involved are independently working together towards a common goal). Personal development is what life is all about. It does not indicate weakness or incompetence...it indicates that we are alive.

Did you know: The strength of a relationship is not measured by how much you *need* the other person...but rather by how much you can be yourself with that person and still feel confident he/she will stick around.

These are just some of the things we can do to build healthy, strong relationships with the people in our lives. It isn't always easy and never really feels finished...but like all important things in life, it is well worth the effort.

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