

Ten Habits of Successful Intimate Partners

Since the early 1980's marriage researchers have conducted a series of long-term studies in which they have examined the question: What do people who are destined to succeed in their relationships actually do differently from those who are destined to fail? Researchers have identified specific interpersonal habits or abilities that distinguish people who are destined to succeed. By assessing the presence or absence of these interpersonal habits researchers have been able to predict with over 90% accuracy which people will eventually divorce. If you want to succeed in your relationship with your partner you'll need to have interpersonal habits like the ones described below. Some of them have to do with how you react when you feel misunderstood or mistreated by him/her, and others are related to how much you think and act in ways that are likely to promote fondness and admiration between you and your partner.

Predictive Habit 1: Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude

Beneath both criticism and contempt lies a general tendency to assume that, if you are upset somebody must have done something wrong. Marriage researchers have discovered that most of the time this assumption is unwarranted, and when partners are upset with each other neither partner has done anything that is intrinsically wrong.

Happily married partners differ on scores of important values and priorities, but they have one thing in common: They avoid assuming that their partner's values, priorities or opinions are wrong and instead assume that there are many potentially legitimate ways to live life. People destined to succeed understand that if you assume the worst of your partner you'll get the worst from your partner. Instead, they give their partners the benefit of the doubt: they assume that there is a legitimate reason for their partner's words or actions even if they don't know what it is yet.

Predictive Habit 2: Standing Up for Yourself Without Putting Your Partner Down

Dropping the idea that one's partner is wrong doesn't mean that one has to give in. People who are destined to succeed believe that their own opinions and expectations are just as important as those of their partners. Rather than criticizing or trying to prove their partners wrong, people who are destined to succeed in their relationships simply ask their partners to "move over and make room for me." They ask their partners to meet them half way. Successful partners both require that their feelings be respected, and make it easy for their partners to be respectful at the same time. They make it easy for their partners to be respectful by refraining from assuming that their partners are wrong.

Predictive Habit 3: Finding the Understandable Part

When disagreements arise, most of us tend to think of our own position as reasonable and our partner's position as unreasonable. In order to receive understanding, first one must give understanding. Many partners are hesitant to acknowledge anything understandable about their partner's point of view, thinking that if they give an inch their partners will take a mile. People destined to succeed in their relationships don't worry about this, because they know that they can always stand up for their own point of view later. They know that just because they acknowledge something legitimate about their partner's point of view doesn't mean that their own point of view isn't legitimate, too.

Predictive Habit 4: Giving Equal Regard

Finding the understandable part is a relatively simple and moderate form of accepting influence, giving equal regard is the most powerful form. The best relationships operate like democracies: one person, one vote. In our work with couples at our clinic, we have found that partners have difficulty "finding the understandable part" or "giving equal regard" unless they are also able to "avoid judgmental thinking and stand up for themselves without putting their partners down."

Predictive Habit 5: Offering Assurances

Whenever an argument seems to be stuck or unproductive, one of the most effective things a person can do is to stop and ask him or herself, "Does my partner think I'm saying that he/she is wrong?" or "Does my partner think I'm saying 'It's my way or the highway?'" When arguments are unproductive the answer to these questions is almost always "yes". We have found that the most powerful thing a partner can do at this point is to simply offer an assurance, by saying something like, "Look, I was pretty worked up back then, and I'm sure you felt criticized by me, but I don't really think there's anything wrong with what you did. It's just different from what I wanted." The offering of an assurance is completely dependent upon a partner's ability to shift from a judgmental to nonjudgmental attitude. However, those who are able to shift to a nonjudgmental attitude and then offer assurance will be successful in repairing the argument a high percentage of the time.

Predictive Habit 6: Understanding and Explaining What Is at Stake

Partners who are destined to succeed in their relationships learn to assume that whenever they have the same arguments over and over again there is something important and legitimate at stake for each of them that is going unrecognized. In our work with couples we help partners develop the habit of looking for the important dreams and fears that lie beneath the stalemates over specific issues.

Predictive Habit 7: Curiosity about Each Other's Worlds

Researchers have known for some time that 67% of couples experience a drop in marital satisfaction after the birth of the first child, but 33% do not. What separates these two groups? One of the strongest predictors is the extent to which partners keep in touch with each other's worlds as they go through this transition.

Curiosity about one's partner's world isn't necessary only during the transitions to parenthood. People who succeed in their relationships maintain curiosity about their partners throughout the course of their relationship. Researchers say that people who succeed devote more "cognitive room" to their partners than those who fail. As they go through their separate days they spend more time thinking about what their partner might be doing, and they remember to ask about what a partner's day has been like when the couple is reunited.

Predictive Habit 8: Noticing and Acknowledging the Positive

People destined to succeed in their relationships are more aware of the positive things that happen in their relationships and they acknowledge them more often. People destined to succeed are also more likely to remember positive memories that have happened in the

recent or distant past and bring them up to enjoy again. People headed for relationship failure do not do this nearly as much. In fact, one poor prognostic indicator is when partners actually re-write history, omitting the good memories.

Predictive Habit 9: Pursuing Shared Meaning

Having a successful intimate relationship involves more than just "getting along." Roommates can get along just fine but intimate partners who are emotionally connected have a sense that they are on a journey together. They have a shared sense of purpose, a common mission. There is a sense of loyalty and agreement to uphold their mutually agreed upon goals and values. People destined to succeed talk freely about their hopes and dreams, and encourage their partners to do the same.

Predictive Habit 10: Making and Responding to Bids for Connection

Throughout daily life, in both small and large ways, people who are destined to succeed in their relationships both make and respond to bids for connection. When their partners make observations or share information with them they engage, showing their interest in what their partners are saying.

There are specific moments when it is especially important to make and respond to bids for connection. These are moments when one or the other partners are feeling upset or vulnerable because of stressful or challenging circumstances in their lives. In these circumstances skilled partners are good at asking for and giving support. They understand that many times, what stressed people need is not help in solving their problems so much as understanding, sympathy, or support. Attempts to cheer one's partner up often backfire because the person who is feeling bad interprets the "cheering" attempts of his or her partner to be evidence that the "cheering" partner is uncomfortable with the "feeling bad" person's feelings and want the "feeling bad" person to "get over it."

People who are skilled in responding to bids help their partners feel understood first, then help their partners explore different avenues for dealing with the problem situation, but only if their partners request help. Often advice giving or problem solving isn't even necessary because when people feel understood and supported they often feel better and know what to do on their own. Feeling understood is often the most critical factor in feeling better.

Selections from:

Emotional Intelligence in Couples Therapy: Advances from Neurobiology and the Science of Intimate Relationships

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