

# Ten Habits of Successful Intimate Partners\*

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Since the early 1980s, 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 people 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 which people eventually divorce with over 90% accuracy. If you want to succeed in your relationship, 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 your partner, 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.

## WHEN YOU FEEL MISUNDERSTOOD OR MISTREATED

### 1. Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude

Research suggests that without meaning to, intimate partners often trigger defensiveness in each other before they even open their mouths! The attitude you have when you're upset will tend to breed cooperativeness or defensiveness in your partner. A *judgmental* attitude is the most damaging to relationships. You know you have a judgmental attitude when you find yourself thinking things like:

- “He shouldn't have done that.”
- “That was really inconsiderate!”
- “He's never satisfied,” or
- “How could anybody think that way?”

Marriage researchers have discovered that, the vast majority of the time, when partners are upset with each other, neither partner has done anything that is intrinsically wrong. For example, sixty-nine percent of marital upsets perpetual arise from conflicting values, priorities, beliefs or personal tendencies for which there is no generally accepted standard. Marriages start to slide when partners assume there is a “correct” standard to which they are entitled to hold their partners accountable. For example, consider the following questions.

- How much arguing is acceptable in marriage?
- How much money should be spent on what type of things?
- How much of life should be planned out versus “make-it-up-as-we-go?”
- Should we work first, then play, or play along the way?
- To what extent is it OK to socialize with members of the opposite sex?
- To what extent is it appropriate for a married person to wear sexy or revealing clothing in public?
- Who should do what chores around the house, how often?
- How neat and organized should our life be?
- How much time should you put into your career versus family?
- How important is it to talk about our feelings?

- How much discipline should be used with the kids?
- How much time should married people spend together versus time with friends?
- How much time should we spend with our extended families?
- How much should we keep each other informed as to where we've been, and whom we've been with?
- What kind of sexual activities are acceptable (or expected)?
- How much financial risk should we take?

Studies suggest that there are a wide variety of legitimate opinions that partners can take on such questions. There are happily married and unhappily married risk-takers, and both happily and unhappily married conservatives. Some couples who place high value on personal freedom are happily married and some are not. Some happily married couples argue a lot and some couples who argue a lot end up divorced. 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 – that is, 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. Beneath even seemingly provocative behavior on the part of their partners, they assume that there are legitimate dreams or priorities that their partners are trying to obtain. In contrast, when people who are destined to fail in their relationships are faced with words or actions from their partners that are upsetting to them, they assume that their partners are acting this way because they have misguided reasoning, priorities, motivations, or intentions, or that their partners have faulty personality characteristics (e.g., "my partner is just lazy, controlling, irresponsible, insensitive, etc.")

Many of us grow up feeling that we don't have the right to be upset with someone unless that person did something wrong. So, when we find ourselves upset, we tend to automatically assume that the other person did something wrong. Otherwise, we wouldn't feel entitled to be upset! Successful people find a way out of this dilemma, realizing that it's normal for people to get upset with each other when their expectations are at cross-purposes. Nobody has to be wrong.

## **2. Standing up for yourself without putting your partner down**

Dropping the idea that your partner is wrong doesn't mean that you have to give in. People who are destined to succeed believe that their own opinions and expectations are just as important as 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. *Standing Up for Yourself involves asking (and requiring, if necessary) that your partner give your priorities, viewpoints or preferences equal regard.* 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. They require that their feelings be respected by avoiding criticizing their partners and instead asking their partners to work toward solutions that take both of their preferences into account.

When couples are distressed, it's most always the case that neither partner has the ability to stand up for him or herself without putting his or her partner down. Instead, partners criticize and never state exactly what they want, try to present their own point of view as the only reasonable option, or give in to their partners while secretly thinking bad

things about them. People who swear that their partners are control freaks are often amazed to learn that their partners are actually willing to compromise when they are asked to “move over and make room for me” rather than judged or criticized. Of course, this doesn’t *always* happen. Sometimes, even in situations where one partner avoids judging the other, and instead simply asks the other to “move over,” the other won’t move over! This is the real test. It’s often at this point where the first partner loses focus and slides back into judging the other, or giving in. The result is a predictable negative slide. People who are destined for success refrain from making a big deal of it when their partners don’t seem willing to meet them half way. They simply hold their ground and continue to insist that their opinions or priorities be given equal consideration.

There are at least three kinds of situations in which people who succeed in relationships stand up firmly for themselves. 1) When they are feeling criticized, 2) When they are feeling dismissed, and 3) When their partners put them down.

**A. When your partner criticizes you.** When feeling criticized, people destined for relationship success readily stand up for themselves. For example, when your husband implies you did something wrong by failing to stop at the grocery store on the way home from work when you knew in the morning that he would need groceries to make dinner.

“I think may be I know what the problem is. It sounds like you’re upset because you think that I did something that is just wrong, but I don’t see it that way. I think you just have a different idea about how you’d like things to be than I do. I’d like to have a relationship were nobody has to worry about forgetting the details. I’d like it if we could both just go with the flow more. You want us to be more organized and think in advance. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that, but I hardly think it’s the only way to live. I’m willing to keep trying to work with you on that, but it’s pretty hard when I feel you implying that there’s something wrong with me for being different than you! I have just as much right to an easy-going life as you do to a planned and efficient one.

Notice that the above statement didn’t include anything like, “You shouldn’t be so upset!” or “You’re over-reacting!” People who are destined to succeed in their relationships stand up for themselves without putting their partners down.

**B. When your partner dismisses your feelings or opinions.** People destined to succeed in their relationships don’t expect to have their own way, but neither will they allow their opinions or expectations to be dismissed or ignored. When feeling dismissed, they say things like,

“Listen to me. I’m not saying that your way is wrong, or that we have to do things my way, but I am saying that my feelings are as important as yours and I need for you to be willing to work with me here.”

Again, notice what *wasn’t* said: “How could you think like that?” “You’re missing the boat” “You’ve got your priorities mixed up,” “You’re being selfish.”

**C. When your partner puts you down.** Sometimes, your partner may be so upset that she or he acts disgusted with you or says degrading things to you. When this happens to people who are destined to succeed in their relationships, they stand up for themselves firmly, but they do it without making a “federal case” out of their partner’s “offense.” They usually begin letting their partners know that they are willing to listen if their partner can stop putting them down. (e.g., “Obviously you’re really upset, and there must be a good reason. I’m willing to try to understand, but I

don't think I can because I'm feeling attacked. Would you try to slow down and just tell me why you're upset?") If their partners keep putting them down, they simply withdraw their cooperation or participation for as long as they continue acting in ways that seem disrespectful. There's no formula for the best thing to say when you reach this point. Sometimes, a simple, "I don't want to talk to you right now" works as well as more complicated statements. More important than what you say is your *attitude*. Angry, frustrated, irritated... these all work just fine. However, self-righteous, disgusted, contemptuous ... these are another matter entirely. Studies show that partners destined to succeed get angry, but not disgusted, or if they do momentarily, they don't stay there. Instead, people who are destined to be treated better by their partners have thoughts like, "It's not a crime that my partner was losing it." "S/he wouldn't have acted that way unless s/he was really feeling threatened." "I did what I needed to do to stand up for myself, and I'll do it again, if needed." "If I can stand up for myself (like I just did) without making a big deal of how wrong my partner was, s/he won't do it as much in the future."

### **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. However, at some point in the argument, those who succeed manage to find something understandable about what their partner is saying or wanting, even if they can't agree overall. They seem to understand an important principle: If you want to receive understanding, first *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. There is no rush. 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. They are able to do two things in succession: Acknowledge the understandable part of their partner's opinions and then stand up for their own opinions, if needed. If you have difficulty acknowledging the understandable part of your partner's feelings often, it may be because you don't feel confident that you can stand up for your own feelings effectively. In couples therapy, your therapist will help you both stand up better for yourself and become more able to acknowledge understandable aspects of your partner's feelings or actions.

Because the understandable reasons for your partner's feelings, intentions or motivations will not always be obvious, it's to your advantage to become good at finding the reasons that are sometimes difficult to see at first. Here's a list of possible reasons that might make your partner's thinking or actions more understandable to you:

- Maybe your partner didn't realize how important this was to you.
- Maybe your partner was having a bad day.
- Maybe your partner didn't have all the facts.
- Maybe your partner was reading something between the lines that you didn't intend to be saying.
- Maybe this issue was more important to your partner than you previously understood.
- Maybe your partner wasn't upset so much about this particular situation as s/he was about where s/he feared things might be headed.

- Maybe your partner felt threatened by you in a way that you didn't understand.
- Maybe your partner was afraid s/he was going to lose something very important to him or her if s/he did things the way you wanted.
- Maybe your partner was acting this way because s/he felt (or had recently felt) criticized or dismissed by you, and s/he felt resentful and uncooperative because of this.
- Maybe your partner just has really different priorities or expectations than you do. Maybe s/he was acting perfectly consistent with his/her priorities. You just don't like it because they are different than yours, but that doesn't make them *wrong*.

Remember, just because you can find understandable or legitimate reasons for your partner's actions or viewpoints doesn't mean you have to give in. Your feelings are probably understandable, too. Things work out best when you give your partner the benefit of the doubt, find the understandable part of your partner's feelings or opinions, and also ask (and require, if necessary) him or her to give equal consideration to yours. But you can't skip the first step! As long as your partner feels criticized or misunderstood, s/he'll be less able to be respectful of your feels and opinions.

#### **4. Giving Equal Regard**

The best relationships operate like democracies: one person, one vote. When people go to cast their votes in a democratic society, nobody stands at the polling place deciding if their reasoning is good enough to allow their votes to count. Their opinions count equally, regardless of what anyone thinks of their reasoning. The same is true in successful good marriages. Successful partners give equal regard, regardless of whether they agree with each other or not. They may argue tooth and nail for their own points of view, but in the end, they are willing to work toward finding mutually satisfying solutions. Either explicitly or implicitly, people destined for relationship success deliver the following message to their partners: "You don't really have to explain yourself. If that's how you feel, then I'm going to make room for your feelings, too. You're my partner, and your feelings should count as much as mine, even if I don't agree with them." In contrast, people who are destined to fail in their relationships are often only willing to give equal regard if they feel that their partners' points of view are compelling enough to merit concessions. Of course, the problem is that most of us rarely find our partners points of view as compelling as our own.

In successful marriages, the willingness to give equal regard doesn't necessarily come at the front end of an argument. In fact, sometimes when researchers looked at the arguing style of partners destined to succeed, they couldn't distinguish them from partners destined to fail. The differences only became clear later, after each partner had exhausted their efforts to convince the other. Both successful and unsuccessful partners often argue vigorously for their own points of view, and often show little regard for their partners' viewpoints during the argument. However, in the end, they are willing to give equal regard. When people are confident that, when the dust settles, their partners are going to be willing to give them equal regard, they can each argue persuasively along the way with less risk that the other person will take offense.

#### **5. Offering Assurance**



Whenever an argument seems to be stuck or unproductive, one of the most effective things you can do is to stop and ask yourself, “Does your partner think I’m saying that he’s *wrong*, or *out-of-line* in some way?” or “Does your 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.” The most powerful thing you 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 than what I wanted.” Another example of an assurance might be, “I know we have a difference of opinion about how to prioritize things here, and I don’t want you to get the idea that I’m saying that things have to be entirely *my way*. I’m willing to work with you on this.” Of course, you can’t offer assurances if you are thinking judgmental thoughts about your partner. If you say one thing, but don’t have an attitude that matches, your partner won’t believe you. The offering of an assurance is completely dependent upon your ability to shift from a judgmental to non-judgmental attitude. However, if you are able to avoid a judgmental attitude and also offer assurances, you’ll be successful in influencing your partner a high percentage of the time.

## 6. Identifying and Explaining What is at Stake

People who are destined to succeed in their relationships realize that the reasons they are upset or have trouble doing what their partner wants sometimes run deeper than the present situation. Often, there is something bigger at stake. Your ability to explain the underlying reasons for being upset will help your partner become more cooperative and understanding. At some point during an argument people destined for success pause and take the conversation to a different level, saying something like, “OK, I think I just figured out why this bothers me so much... I’m worried that...” Consider the following common “bigger” reasons why you may be upset or unable to consider your partner’s opinion or request:

- You’re worried that your partner is sending a “bigger message” that applies to more than just the present situation (*for example, “Your opinion doesn’t count,” “You are not as important to me as my work,” “I don’t think you’re intelligent enough to make good decisions,” etc*)
- You’re worried that if you do what your partner wants (or if your partner keeps thinking or acting this way), you’ll lose a dream or how you want things to be or a basic need or desire that is important to you. (*Example: You find yourself calling your partner selfish joining a golf league on weekends, but what you’re really upset about is that his/her golf precludes trips to visit your parents, and conflicts with a dream or priority you have of wanting your children to grow up close to their grandparents.*)
- You’re worried about where this is going. The present situation bothers you because it may be a step toward something much worse. (*Example: It’s not his/her staying out late with his/her friends last night that bothers you so much as your fear that s/he may make a habit of it – like your best buddy’s wife did before their divorce*)
- It’s not what your partner wants that bothers you so much. It’s that you feel criticized or dismissed, as if your partner is saying you’re wrong just because your wants, needs, or opinions are different. (*Example: Although you find yourself arguing about the fact that your partner wants to go into the office on Saturdays, what you’re really upset about is his/her implication that you should be working on Saturdays, too, rather than relaxing*)

- Beneath it all, you're worried that what's happening now is similar to something bad that happened earlier in your life. *(Example: It's upsetting that your wife has stopped going with you to church, not so much because of the example she's setting for the kids [as you have argued], but because when your father stopped going to church he was also having an affair.)*

Unless you are able identify what the bigger issues are that lie beneath your reactions in the present situation, you may end up arguing over superficial things and leave the real issues unaddressed. People who are destined to succeed in their relationships look for the bigger needs, dreams and fears at stake in any given situation.

## **BUILDING THE EMOTIONAL BOND**

### **7. Curiosity about your partner's world.**

Studies suggest that a significant difference between people destined to succeed in marriage versus those destined for failure is how much they know about their partners' worlds, and how much they share with their partner about their own 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% don't. What separates these two groups? One of the strongest predictors is the extent to which partners keep in touch with each others worlds as they go through this transition. The worlds of new mothers change dramatically when a baby arrives. Husbands who enter into the new world of their wives end up in happier, more stable marriages. On the other hand, new mothers who avoid becoming so absorbed with the new baby that they lose interest in their husbands' worlds end up in happier marriages as well.

Curiosity about one's partner's world isn't necessary only during the transition to parenthood. People who succeed in their relationships maintain curiosity about their partners throughout the course of their relationship. Studies suggest that partners who are destined to succeed are much more able to answer questions like:

- What is my partner looking forward to the most in the next week?
- What has my partner done that he is most proud of lately?
- What has been most disappointing to my partner lately?
- What compliment has my partner received from a person other than yourself recently?
- If my partner could follow his heart right now and do one thing he otherwise wouldn't, what would it be?

People who succeed in their relationships make it their business to know these kinds of things about their partners. Researchers say that people who succeed devote more "cognitive room" to their partners. 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 their partners' days have been like when they are reunited.

### **8. Keeping sight of 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. For example, they acknowledge and express appreciation for the small, but often taken-for-granted things that their partners do each day. Taking care of the children might be just part of the agreed upon division of duties in a marriage, but when a wife has had a particularly challenging day with the kids, a husband destined to succeed will let her know that he appreciates the effort she put into the day. Similarly, even though a husband has agreed that he will accept responsibility for reading to the children each night before bed, wives destined to succeed let them know that they appreciate their husbands for being willing to do this.

When marriages become distressed, studies show that partners underestimate the positive things that happen between them by about 50% compared to objective observers who rate the positive things that happen. Many positive things happen each day that escape the attention of those who are destined to fail in their relationships. On



the other hand, people who succeed take advantage of opportunities to express appreciation. For example, a husband who is destined to succeed will notice his wife laughing on the phone, and later remember to tell her that he thinks she is a good buddy to her friends. 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 don't do this nearly as much.

## **9. 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. Bids for connection are embedded in seemingly insignificant communication. For example, a wife remarks to her husband that she’s going shopping for some summer clothes. This is a small bid for the husband’s attention. The husband, busy reading the paper, can respond in one of two ways. He can either engage, for example, by putting down the paper momentarily and asking her what kind of clothes she’s looking for, or not engage, keeping his nose in the newspaper

People who are really good at making and responding to bids initiate small connecting moves many times throughout each day. A skilled “connector” might think of something she can do to make her partner’s load a little lighter, take time to initiate a plan for her and her partner to do something fun, spend time thinking or learning about something important to her partner, notice something in her day that she knows her partner would be interested in -- then remember to tell him about it later, remember to ask her partner about something specific she knows will be happening in his day, ask him to do something with her (a bike ride, walk, etc.), take responsibility for making (ordering) food for him, or leave a voicemail message or an email to let him know she is thinking about him. Connection-making is an art, and those who are destined to succeed in their relationships are masterful.

## **10. 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. In small, everyday ways, they communicate to their partners, “I want to be on your team, because I think you’re pretty darn cool, and I think that together, we can have a better life than I could by myself.”

People who are destined to succeed look for ways to work with their partners to build a unique culture, complete with its own rituals. They don’t sacrifice their own individual identities for the sake of the group, but rather try to find a way to mesh what’s important to them with what’s important to their partners. If their own dreams come into conflict with those of their partners, they work hard to find solutions that incorporate both of their dreams. They realize that if they squash their partners’ dreams in pursuit of their own, they’ll lose perhaps the most important dimension of their relationship: a sense of mutual loyalty and adventure.

### **The Master Aptitude: Influencing Your Moods and Attitudes**

The ten attitudes and behaviors necessary to succeed in relationships are described in this booklet. They are easy to understand and learn, but can be very

difficult to do, because, at key moments, you may find yourself in a state of mind that isn't compatible with the needed behavior or attitude. In order to change your thinking or behaviors, you must learn how to get into the right frame of mind for the task. For example, marriage researchers have noticed that, when a marriage is distressed, each partner generally reacts to the other during arguments in highly predictable and patterned ways. Thanks to some very helpful brain research in the past 15 years, we now know that this is because, across our lives, each of our brains gets conditioned to produce highly specific *response programs*. These are conditioned brain circuits that are pre-programmed so that, once triggered, they unfold as if they had a mind of their own, producing a predictable pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Brain researchers call these brain states "executive operating systems;" or "intrinsic motivational circuits;" ordinary people call them "states of mind" or "moods." The important thing is not what they are called, but to recognize that these internal response programs can dramatically dictate how you interact with your partner.

Most of the time, it's an advantage to have these automatic, pre-packaged response circuits in our brains, because when they are activated, we automatically experience motivation to learn, to love, to be close to others, to be playful, to defend and protect ourselves when needed, etc. But when relationships are distressed, researchers have found that these automatic response circuits are often to blame. Often, the wrong circuits get activated at critical moments, and the needed circuits remain dormant. Research on internal response circuits suggests that problems come in three varieties: 1. When you get caught in the "pull" of an internal response circuit, and are unable to do what is needed (e.g., when the 'anger program' kicks in, and you just can't listen to your partner when it would ultimately be to your benefit to do so), 2. When you avoid doing or saying needed things because to do so would likely trigger an uncomfortable internal response circuit in you (e.g., When you are unable to admit when you're wrong, because doing so triggers an anxious or vulnerable state in you), 3. When a needed response state simply doesn't show up (e.g., When you need to respond to your partner with tenderness or caring, but you find yourself preoccupied with other things). To improve your relationship, you will need to become familiar with the specific mood state patterns that happen inside of you during key intimate situations. Your best shot at acting differently comes when you develop the ability to shift internal states when needed. If this sounds complicated to you, don't worry. Your therapist will help you identify and learn to influence your internal states when needed.

You can read more about the brain's executive operating systems and how they impact relationships in Brent Atkinson's articles, *The Emotional Imperative*, *Brain to Brain*, *Altered States*, and *The Love Breakthrough*, available at [www.thecouplesclinic.com](http://www.thecouplesclinic.com) (click on "resources," then "articles").