

Dr. Debra's Newsletter

Maintaining a Relationship
from the
Courtship Phase
and Beyond

By being your best self during courtship, you set up expectations in your partner. She or he believes that this is who you really are and that this behavior will continue. He or she falls in love with your best self, and you fall in love with your partner's best self. If you decide to marry, you two assume you will both remain your best selves for as long as you both shall live.

After a couple has been together a long while, they often don't have the motivation, time, or energy to continue in their best selves. They allow themselves to relax into their easy selves. They stop making as much of an effort to please each other. Romantic gestures and dates get lost in a busy schedule. Work involvement increases. Criticism replaces appreciation.

When you become disappointed with your partner or feel let down, you might argue and feel upset, or might just let it pass. But then you, also, do less previous courtship behaviors. When this happens, you or

both of you can experience feelings of resignation, "This is what's supposed to happen in long relationships," or a hurt response, such as, "You're not the man/woman you used to be. You don't love me."

Much of this problem can be avoided or improved by each of you becoming aware of, and taking responsibility for, your part in setting up your partner's expectations.

1. If you are in the courtship phase of a relationship, take a good look at what you are promising. Don't set up expectations you aren't willing or able to keep. Ask yourself, "Can I continue to do this activity with a good attitude for the duration of the relationship--maybe for the rest of my life?" If the answer is no, you must be clear with your partner that these are not your regular behaviors. When you accept dates, make statements such as, "I don't really like baseball, but I'd like to spend time with you, so I'll go and root for your team."

When you're at your partner's home, and you help with cooking

and washing the dishes, remember this behavior doesn't stop. If you don't believe in cooking or doing dishes, now is the time to say so.

2. If you are in a long-term relationship, think back to what you

inadvertently promised. Discuss with your partner what expectations

you might have set up that you no longer fulfill. Find out how they feel

about this. Are they resentful, resigned, hurt, angry or disappointed? Do

they feel unloved? Once you find out which of the courtship behaviors

are important to your partner, resolve to reintroduce them into your relationship.

3. Realize the important difference between willing and wanting.

When you were dating, you wanted to spend time with your boyfriend or

girlfriend. You felt willing to do things, try activities, or be extra

considerate, just to please him or her.

In a relationship, most people believe the ideas of wanting and

willing equate to the same thing. People, especially women, become

upset if their partner doesn't want to do something with them, even if

they are willing to do it. She can feel that he doesn't love her if he no longer wants to do her favorite activities. Or she can feel he is not being romantic.

The truth is, that for a man to be willing to do something he doesn't want to do, just because he wants to please you, is actually a loving act. And vice versa. How's that for romance?

At times like this, your partner deserves more points, not less. Give him a hug and a kiss and say something like, "Thank you, honey. I know you're not fond of _____, but I appreciate you going with me."

4. Check your attitude. When you were first dating, you probably displayed a more positive attitude toward your new love that might have since slipped away. If you don't want to do something, yet are willing to do so, you won't score any points by acting out your resistance to your partner's interests. If you make the choice to participate with her or him, don't take away from your partner's pleasure. Meaning, go with a

cheerful heart. No whining, complaining, rolling eyes, or passive-aggressive comments such as, "I don't see why you want to get together with those boring people," or, "This is such a waste of money/time."

If you don't really want to join your partner, but are willing, it's fine to communicate your feelings, although not in a complaining or long-suffering tone. Say, "I'm not that interested, but if it will make you happy, I'll be glad to do it."

5. Check your level of appreciation.

In the beginning of a relationship, you tend to notice and appreciate all the other person does for you. You also tend to express your gratitude, not just by saying thank you, but by using other appreciative statements, such as, "I'm having so much fun," or "I appreciate your support," or "When you do that for me, I feel loved." A warm smile, a hug and a kiss, great sex, are also tangible demonstrations of appreciation.

If your partner has stopped being his or her best self, perhaps one of the main reasons is because you've stopped expressing your appreciation of his or her efforts. You can never express too much appreciation and love in a relationship.

6. Remain optimistic. Don't give up your efforts if your partner doesn't appear to respond positively at first, or says something derogative such as, "I thought you hated when I do _____." Remember they have months, or maybe years, of negative feelings about their unmet expectations.

By persevering in your goal of being your best self, not only will you increase your own self-esteem, over time you will be rewarded with a happier, more loving relationship.