

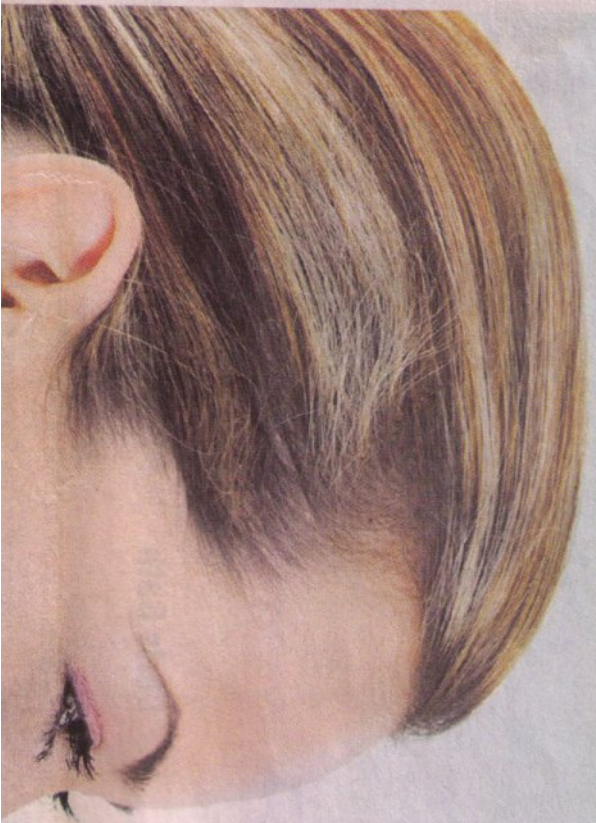
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TRUST IN US

Keep your relationship alive. Page 20



Lessons in making love last

The relationship roller-coaster is tricky but a foundation of friendship, honesty and trust will smooth the bumps, writes **Isobel King**.

Tom Anderberg and Sara Carkagis, both 29, have known each other most of their lives.

Growing up in the Blue Mountains, they met as 10-year-old classmates, dated in their teens and by 21, after a few years apart for study and travel, they were living together in inner-city Sydney. They now own a place together, this year had a baby boy, Wolf, and are busily planning a December wedding.

In the shaky world of relationships, where Bureau of Statistics figures show one-third of marriages will end in divorce, their enduring partnership defies the trend.

So, what's their secret? "I guess we're just best friends," Carkagis says.

Unpacking what that simple sentiment means is what relationship counsellors grapple with every day, yet most agree on the foundations of a successful relationship.

The Relationships Australia website (relationships.org.au) has downloadable manuals full of sage advice for those seeking guidance. Central to them all is the importance of open and honest communication, the ability to resolve conflict, mutual respect and some shared goals and values. But putting the theory into practice isn't always so easy, especially where personal baggage is concerned.



Communication is key

"Emotional self-management is the core of a good relationship," says relationships counsellor Paul Gale-Baker, the author of *Relationship Essentials*.

"It's the way we're emotionally triggered by our partners that often makes communication difficult, so we need to learn to manage those emotions when we're communicating."

It requires a degree of trust and self-awareness that often doesn't come naturally.

A love and life coach, Sandy Ewing, says she will often have to delicately navigate a client's reluctance to take responsibility for their part in a string of unsuccessful relationships.

"A common thread is the tendency to blame others and to develop avoidance patterns that mean they're not looking at themselves," Ewing says.

"People who have had a bad experience in a relationship can take away a lot of negative reinforcement about themselves."

It's an old cliché but the relationship pros stand by it: you can't find true happiness within a relationship until you first find happiness within yourself.

As clinical psychologist Angelica Bilibio puts it: "You have to differentiate between the 'I' and the 'we'. Have your own hobbies and outlets and establish your own sense of self."

"It's very risky to look to someone else for your happiness."

Cut out criticism

The competing pressures of work and home life often take their toll on a relationship, especially when the first flush of blind love is replaced by the reality that your partner is not perfect.

That requires a level of self-discipline in communication.

"Criticising your partner is the death knell of a relationship," warns Christine Bennett, who has been a relationships counsellor for 16 years and regularly sees the damaging effects of persistent criticism.

"If all you're doing is complaining or criticising your partner and not appreciating



Partners in time ... Tom Anderberg, Sara Carkagis and their son, Wolf. Photo: Jacky Ghossein; illustration: Cathy Wilcox

their good points, then you'll undermine the relationship," she says.

Ewing agrees many people sabotage relationships through being overly critical, constantly looking for faults instead of focusing on the positives.

Embrace conflict

It's undoubtedly one of the most challenging areas of any relationship, professional or personal, but experts agree that confronting and resolving conflict is one of the most critical skills to master (see box).

Even Anderberg and Carkagis admit it didn't come easily. "With practise, we've gotten better at dealing with conflict," Carkagis says. "The key is not to delay confronting the issue; just get in there and work out what's going on, rather than let things simmer." The couple agree that once the cards are on the table, the issues are generally resolved quickly.

Bennett warns of the dangers of "exit" mode – where one person withdraws from the situation, which can keep a grievance festering for days.

"Distancing behaviours are very damaging," she says.

"Intimacy grows through the ability to disclose all the emotions that go on, even difficult ones."



Fighting the good fight

Could there really be a one-size-fits-all answer to most domestic disputes? Brian Mitchell has worked as both a clinical psychologist and a corporate adviser on dispute resolution and insists certain principles apply when resolving any dispute. It all comes down to effective negotiation.

"Irrespective of what the relationship drama is, there are certain steps and principles one needs to follow; it's just the language that changes," says Mitchell, who is so confident in his theory, he's distilled those principles into an app that guides users through the process of resolving typical relationship challenges.

And it seems part of the problem might be that men and women have vastly different assumptions about how well they handle conflict.

To see how perceptions differ, Mitchell engaged a PhD student in psychology to survey about 100 workers in Sydney about their views on effective negotiation. The results showed just one in four women surveyed believed relationship dramas were likely to be resolved fairly, compared with almost 70 per cent of men. And 75 per cent of the women viewed "kissing and making up" as the most common response to disputes in relationships.

"These and other findings suggest that women are far more realistic in their views on relationship problems," says Mitchell, who came up with the app idea with his son, Evan.

"Working through disputes is the soundest way of firming up a relationship and building mutual trust. After all, nothing needs negotiation like romance."

Love Me, Love Me Not ... Couples is available from Apple's App Store for \$5.49.

Keep the sexual spark alive

Sex – or lack of it – can be a source of simmering resentment but once the "honeymoon" phase of a relationship is over, and particularly when the exhaustion of parenthood kicks in, sex can take a back seat.

With that comes the added danger of a straying partner.

"It is one of those incredibly difficult areas to negotiate, with most couples experiencing some disparity of sexual interest," says Gale-Baker, who stresses the importance of working out a middle ground with which both parties are happy.

Dedicated "date nights", wearing something that makes you feel sexy, watching erotic movies together and maintaining "novelty and variety" in the bedroom are tips from the professionals to keep the spark alive.

"It's often a complaint of the male that he always has to initiate the sex," Bennett says.

"I encourage joint responsibility; there needs to be a deliberate intention to keep the sex alive."

Trust: the cornerstone

What about the widely held belief men are simply not wired to be monogamous?

“Criticising your partner is the death knell of a relationship.

Christine Bennett, counsellor

Even Anderberg finds that hard to argue with. "You'd be kidding yourself if you said you don't want anything else but it's a decision to be monogamous; a respect thing," he says.

"I don't want what that would lead to, so it's a pretty simple decision in the end."

With lack of trust highlighted in Relationship Australia's latest Relationships Indicators Survey as one of the four main reasons for relationship breakdowns – and an increasing one – building trust is clearly one of the biggest hurdles.

"Real intimacy involves engaging very deeply with another person but a lot of people in marriages and long-term relationships never actually get there," Gale-Baker says.

Anderberg and Carkagis believe they have. "We just genuinely enjoy hanging out with each other," Carkagis says.

