

Take five

Therapist James Earl shares his five essential relationship rules



In my years as a relationship and sex therapist, I have learned some less-than-obvious tips that can lead to more contented and harmonious romantic relationships. Here, in no particular order, are five ideas that may make you think...

1

Take their first answer

If you ask your partner 'How are you?' and they give a slightly clipped response ('I'm fine'), take a step back.

You may have picked up that they're not really fine, but if you ask a second question: 'Are you sure you're OK?' they will start to get irritated.

'I said I'm fine!'

'Well now you seem annoyed!'

'I'm annoyed because you keep asking if I'm OK!'

You may recognise your partner is not OK, but since it's probably not about you, you don't need them to reassure you. The quickest way out of normal human grumpiness is to leave the other person to come out of it, rather than

asking that they deal with YOUR anxiety too.

Recognise the need for emotional space. The clipped answer is telling you, 'I don't want to talk about it right now,' so respect their wishes. Some people think empathy is chasing down every last nuance of expressed feeling in their partner, but, frankly, this says more about you than it does about them.

So – take their first answer, and leave them with their own feelings. That's real empathy.

Of course, this doesn't work if your partner NEVER shares their feelings. Well-regulated couples respect each other's space, but also step forward to share.





FIVE DOS & DON'TS

DO give your partner space for their feelings

DON'T have dutiful sex

DON'T blame your partner for how you're feeling

DO remember playfulness and caring are the two most important roles

DO be kind

2

Avoid dutiful sex

Picture two people lying in bed, and one asks the other out of the blue, 'Do you fancy it?' This rarely goes well. Sex without any prior connection usually feels embarrassing, if not downright alienating.

For sex to be fun, we almost always need to feel aligned with our partner outside of sex. So, a playful relationship, in which you feel the other person is cool and makes you feel good, is essential foreplay.

A headrush of desire in not only unlikely with a long-term partner, it's really not necessary. If you feel connected, and that the other person is cool, you've got what you need for sex.

Sex in any other circumstances feels dutiful: 'We haven't had sex for three months, we really should do it.' Or worse, 'This will keep them happy.' Sex should be fun, not another chore.

If one partner is pestering the other for sex, it's time for

a conversation about what makes sex fun. And this conversation is mostly about how you get into the mood, not about what happens when you get there. 'Take me out dancing! Talk to me! Take me to that cool bar for a drink! Let's play snap!'

Remember that sex cannot do the job of love. It's just fun to do with someone you love. You can still love someone without having sex, and sex is not a duty of love. ▶

3

Blame is not the name of the game

Don't feel snookered by your partner and blame them for the way you're feeling, thinking or behaving. Say, 'When you do that, I get really cross', NOT 'You make me really cross.' The latter is anyway untrue, we always choose our own reaction. This, incidentally, is why I have trouble with the word 'trigger'. If I say 'You trigger me,' I'm implying I don't have a choice in how I react.

Saying, 'You make me cross' is not only blaming, you can see it is unlikely to land well. But it is also disempowering; it puts the origin of my feelings on you, rather than me.

If we acknowledge these are MY feelings, we recognise we can choose differently if we want to, and thus have more power in the relationship.



4

Remember your two roles

There are only two jobs to do if you're in a long-term relationship. In fact, you might argue that these two roles are the universal reason why we choose to be in a long-term couple relationship, And the two roles are NOT love and sex.

One role is to be available for play, when you have time. FUN is essential, and your partner must feel that life with you is more fun than living alone.

Even if there's no time for play now, you signal – by a generally optimistic, playful attitude – that you're ready for play when the opportunity arises. And you both need to take responsibility for fun, so book the theatre tickets. Or invite your partner to come for a walk or play cards.

The second role is caring and supporting the other person's growth. Be there for your partner, be aware of their enthusiasms and don't squash their blue-sky thinking. Make being 'me' easier for them (and more fun) than living alone.

5

Just be kind

You really can't go wrong with this one!

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