

Relationship News

Relationship Checkup

Most adults engage in long-term relationships, including marriage and other committed partnerships. Nearly everyone experiences difficulties in their marriage or committed relationship from time to time, but some people seem more prepared to anticipate these hard times and respond to them more skillfully than others.

The Relationship Checkup is a list of 11 points that will help you evaluate your relationship. These points are based on recent research completed separately by psychologists Judith Wallerstein and John Gottman (see Suggested Reading, last page). Check off the statements that apply to your relationship, and you will quickly gain a sense of the strengths and the opportunities for improvement.

1. People in successful, long-lasting relationships invested themselves fully in the relationship. While they have positive relationships with their parents, siblings, and other relatives, they are not overly involved with them. Some signs that you have a healthy relationship with your family (not too close, not too distant) include:

- Your families visit when invited.
- Their visits are short but satisfying.
- You speak with family members by phone, but not too often.
- Family members give advice when they are asked.

The following are some signs that your family may be too involved in your life. This can create problems in your relationship over time.

- Your family members visit too often.
- They stay too long.
- They telephone frequently.
- They give unsolicited advice.
- They drop in unannounced.

2. People in successful relationships have their own identity as a couple. There is a feeling of both togetherness and independence in the relationship. If you have developed an identity as a couple, the following things are most likely true:

- You feel loyal toward each other.
- You listen carefully to each other.
- You know each other's histories.
- You pay attention to each other's moods and body language.
- You share your thoughts and feelings.
- You allow each other a private space and don't intrude on it.

– You respect each other as separate, autonomous people.
– If you have not fully developed your sense of identity as a couple, you will recognize signs like these:

- You are sometimes disloyal toward each other.
- You don't listen carefully to each other.
- You don't know very much about each other's pasts.
- You ignore each other's moods and body language.
- You keep your thoughts and feelings to yourselves.
- You sometimes invade each other's private space.
- Even though you may live in the same house, it sometimes seems like you are living parallel lives.

3. Bringing children into a relationship changes it radically. Couples with children learn to successfully integrate them into their relationship. Positive signs include:

- You accept that there are times when you must place your own needs after the needs of your child.
- You do your best to stay in touch with each other emotionally and nurture your relationship.
- You set aside time every week for the two of you to spend time alone together.

The following signs indicate that you have not fully integrated children into your relationship:

- You resent the times when you must put your child's needs ahead of your own.
- You are overly focused on your child.
- You have lost touch with each other emotionally.
- You hardly ever find time to be alone with your partner.

4. Every relationship is challenged by crises and life transitions. Losing a job, a death in the family, a serious accident, or other significant event can test any relationship. If your relationship has successfully navigated life's crises and transitions, the following statements are most likely true:

- You never blame each other for the stress that comes with the crisis.
- You face difficult times as a team.
- You look for ways to support each other emotionally.
- You help each other keep your perspective when there is a crisis.
- You seek outside support during times of crisis (talking to friends and family, seeing a counselor, etc.).

If the crises and life transitions have done harm to your relationship, you have probably experienced the following during the difficult times:

- One partner seems to emotionally abandon the other.

- One partner blames the other.
- One partner becomes extremely angry, worried, or anxious.
- You don't seek support from people who could help you.

5. Successful relationships are safe places where anger, conflict, and differences may safely be expressed. Each partner is allowed to have and express their own views. The following signs point to this being true:

- You have had serious conflicts, but you have not allowed them to damage your relationship.
- You respect the other person's right to stand his or her ground.
- You may find anger uncomfortable, but you accept that it is a part of life.

In relationships where it is *not* safe to express conflict, the following things are true:

- Your conflicts have harmed your relationship.
- You disagree about many things but never talk about them.
- You both try to intimidate the other into agreeing with your point of view.
- Anger is so uncomfortable that you avoid it.
- There are no limits to what you will do when you become angry.

6. Successful long-term relationships have a positive sexual component. The partners take care to protect their sexual relationship from the demands of work and family. The signs of such a relationship are:

- You sometimes have different levels of sexual need, but you make room for each other's changing levels of desire.
- You are honest with each other about your changing sexual desires and feelings.
- You set aside time for your sexual relationship and protect your privacy.
- If a sexual relationship is less than satisfying, the following statements are true:
 - You find it hard to talk about sex.
 - Sex is like a battlefield.
 - You never have time for sex.

7. Successful partners share laughter and fun times, and work to maintain their mutual interests. For example:

- You have fun together.
- You make each other laugh.
- You find each other interesting.
- You each have your own interests that you pursue on your own.

If your relationship is becoming stale, you will tend to describe it like this:

- You rarely have fun together anymore.
- You don't laugh much when you are together.

- You are bored with each other.
- You avoid spending time together.
- You have few shared interests.

8. Relationships that last are safe places where you can let down your guard and be vulnerable. You know you can count on the other to comfort and encourage you. If this is true, you might describe it as follows:

- It is okay to be vulnerable when you are with your partner.
- You understand each other.
- You encourage each other.
- You pay attention to each other's moods and respond when the other seems needy.

If your relationship is *not* a very safe place, the following is probably true:

- It is not safe to be needy and vulnerable in your relationship.
- You exhaust each other's emotional reserves.
- You don't pay attention to each other's moods.
- When you are worried about something, you avoid telling your partner.
- You feel worse about yourself when you are with your partner.

9. People who have successful long-term relationships stay romantic and idealistic about each other, even though they are growing older. These are some of the signs of such a relationship:

- You have good memories of when you fell in love with your partner.
- You are glad to be growing older with your partner.

If you have lost some of the romance of your relationship, you are likely to agree with these statements:

- You can hardly remember the days when the two of you first fell in love.
- Seeing your partner grow older makes you feel badly because it reminds you that you are growing older.

10. You have far more positive moments in your relationship than negative ones. Some signs of positive moments include:

- You show affection for each other.
- You apologize for the hurtful things you may say or do.
- You show each other empathy.
- You are polite to each other.

Examples of negative moments include:

- Your discussions often leave you feeling frustrated.

- You often pick on each other.
- Many of your conversations turn into arguments.
- You behave disrespectfully toward each other.
- You are physically violent with each other.

11. People in successful relationships are able to manage conflict productively. They are skilled at keeping times of discord from getting out of control. For example:

- You call a time-out when your emotions escalate.
- You know how to calm yourselves down.
- You take care to speak and listen nondefensively.
- You take care to validate the other person's point of view, even when you disagree with it.

Couples in less successful relationships allow conflict to become damaging in the following ways:

- You blame each other.
- You treat each other disrespectfully.
- You deny responsibility for your own actions.
- You become so angry that you leave or emotionally withdraw.

Number of items you checked in the nonshaded areas: _____

Number of items you checked in the shaded areas: _____

Ideally, you checked *no* items in the shaded areas. If you checked more than five, you have some opportunities to improve your relationship. As a beginning, you may wish to read one or more of the books listed in the Suggested Reading box. You may also wish to make an appointment for a free consultation with one of our professional counselors and develop a relationship-building plan. You will find additional relationship-building tips on our web site, www.ABCD.com.

Suggested Reading

Gottman, John, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1999.

Gottman, John, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York, NY: Fireside Books, 1994.

Wallerstein, Judith, and Blakeslee, Sandra, *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts*. New York, NY: Warner Books, 1995.