**IMPROVING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Every romantic relationship experiences some challenges. No relationship is perfect. This document presents a series of strategies that couples can apply to improve their relationship. To utilize this document effectively, you should apply two principles. This section discusses these principles.

**Attempt an additional strategy every month**

First, at least once a month, you and your partner should apply a strategy in this document that you have not attempted before. Whenever you anticipate that you will continue to apply more strategies in the future, you become increasingly convinced the relationship will improve.

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| Did you know? | When couples feel the quality of relationships can fundamentally improve, they are not as likely to overreact in response to minor conflicts; the quality of their relationship, therefore, improves |

**The possibility of setbacks**

Nevertheless, even when couples attempt these strategies, they might still experience quite a few setbacks and problems in the relationship. And, because they assume these strategies should help their relationship, they might become more frustrated with these setbacks and problems than before. So, be mindful of this possibility. Appreciate that setbacks and problems are common—but should gradually subside in the future.

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| **1 Temporary commitment** |

In many relationships, even marriages, one or both partners are continually evaluating the relationship. They might experience thoughts like “I’m not sure this relationship will last” or “We are fighting too often to commit to each other”. These thoughts, although natural, and even common, can actually damage the relationship. The individuals become even more attuned to the problems. Minor problems seem important. Moderate problems seem overwhelming.

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| Did you know? | When couples feel committed to each other—that is, when they are no longer evaluating whether the other person is the right partner—the strengths of this relationship become more prominent in their minds; the problems seem to subside |

So somehow, even for a limited period, perhaps a month, both partners should stop evaluating the relationship. They should not be contemplating about whether their partner is right for them. They should commit to this person, at least for a temporary period. The following table presents some strategies you can utilize to achieve this goal.

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| Recommended practice | Justification or clarification |
| Decide you will commit to this person for a certain period, such as two months | * To illustrate, tell yourself you will not leave your partner during this time—except in response to domestic violence or other serious matters |
| Whenever you experience doubts about whether your relationship will last, say to yourself “With effort and work, relationships can improve fundamentally over time” | * To help you remember this exercise, repeat to yourself, five times, something like “Whenever I doubt the relationship I will remind myself that, with work, the relationship can improve fundamentally” * Then, imagine yourself, in the future, experiencing some doubts, and then remembering this sentence * This procedure is called an implementation intention and increases the likelihood that you will remember to initiate this exercise |
| Remind yourself that even random events can elicit doubts about your relationship | * As one study showed, even when people sat on an unstable chair, they were more likely to feel insecure about their relationship |
| In a private place, perhaps jot down some doubts you experience about the relationship, such as “I think my partner is too selfish”. Then, complete activities that have been shown to diminish the impact of these doubts | For example, you could   * attempt to consider the benefits of this doubt—such as the benefits of a partner who can be selfish * replace this thought with a more nuanced alternative, such as “Like many people, my partner can be selfish at times but not always” * consider the evidence of this thought—and perhaps other explanations of this evidence * decide what a friend would say about this thought * repeat this thought very slowly, to the tune of a song like Happy Birthday, in a silly voice like Donald Duck, or many times |

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| **2 Novel experiences** |

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| Did you know? | After couples experience exciting, unfamiliar experiences together, they tend to feel more positively about their relationship. They project the excitement of their experience onto the relationship. |

After you commit to your partner, you need to share more novel, exciting, and uplifting experiences together. That is, you should, at least occasionally, gravitate to activities together that you have not tried before. The following table presents some insights on how you can achieve this goal.

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| Recommended practice | Justification or clarification |
| Brainstorm a suite of activities you could, perhaps one day, share in the future. Maybe repeat this procedure several times across a year | You might, for example, decide you could   * travel to a remote destination or attend a festival * visit a nude beach * climb a mountain * visit locations in your own state, such as a winery * attempt an unconventional sport, like archery or aikido * try an unconventional game * learn various skills, like cooking, speaking languages, horse riding, juggling, music instruments, specific apps, magic tricks, and art * organize various events, like a dinner party * participate in outdoor events, like a flash mob, kitesurfing, paintball, kayaking, * participate in charity events, such as volunteering at a homeless shelter * observe performances, such as the opera, a baseball match, a museum, or a play * eat, drink, or cook something novel |
| Occasionally, undertake one of these activities together | * Perhaps, you could each specify your top 10 activities separately—and then choose activities that you both want to attempt |
| Once a month or so, learn about an exercise that tends to improve mood and then practice this exercise together | For example, you could try these activities—each one of which has been shown to be effective   * Transcribe your worries. Consider the extent to which these worries will bother you in one week, month, year, or decade * Decide to worry only at particular times, such Sunday at 3.00 for an hour * Gaze outside and notice all the colours, patterns, and textures. Or attempt to describe the room with your eyes closed * In nature, orient attention to the smells, sounds, and feelings; visit natural environments that elicit a sense of awe * Create a list of small gifts you can buy friends—and occasionally buy these gifts; these purchases tend to promote happiness * Express compassionate words to yourself--the same words you would say if someone you love was upset |

Although couples should occasionally share novel, exciting activities together, they should also develop some capabilities, skills, and knowledge apart. They could attend separate training program or read different manuals.

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| Did you know? | Couples who have developed very different capabilities—but share similar values—often thrive. |

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| **3 Embrace challenges** |

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| Did you know? | People who can readily override their natural impulses and, therefore, demonstrate self-discipline tend to enjoy better relationships. |

Even after these novel, exciting activities, you will continue to experience challenges in your relationship. Fights and disputes are almost universal. To a significant extent, whether you can manage these challenges well depends on the capacity of you, as well as your partner, to override natural impulses—impulses such as the urge to yell, to complain unnecessarily, to escape, and so forth. Therefore, both together and separately, you need to undertake a series of activities that enhance your capacity to manage these impulses and to resist these urges. The following table illustrates some of these activities

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| Recommended practice | Justification or clarification |
| Regularly, perhaps one or two mornings a week, complete three distinct activities that demand considerable effort (see Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009) | To illustrate, some mornings, you should together   * clean your house for 20 minutes as vigorously as you can * read an article—something that could be helpful or informative—as rapidly as you can * complete a tedious activity that you had been avoiding * stretch your body, such as touch your toes, while brushing your teeth * arise from bed significantly earlier than usual * more importantly, undertake an activity that your partner would like you to complete rather than something you like   If people often complete tasks in the morning that demand effort, their capacity to sustain effort over the day and manage their impulses improves. |
| Write a list of your faults your partner does not like—faults that you are unlikely to overcome. Ask your partner to complete this task as well | * After people acknowledge their faults, they are not as defensive; their self-esteem might even improve |
| Uncover opportunities to embrace, rather than criticize, these faults of your partner | * For example, suppose your partner likes to avoid you during tense moments and returns to their office. You might purchase a comfortable pillow and arrange this pillow in this office—rather than complain about their tendency to avoid you * When people embrace a fault, this shortcoming, after a while, does not seem as frustrating. They begin to associate this fault with more pleasant feelings. |
| Attempt to forgive your partner rather than maintain resentment towards previous experiences | * Attempt to imagine the negative emotions your partner might have experienced during this time. These simple images have been shown to promote forgiveness |

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| Did you know? | Men who feel ashamed of their body or masculinity tend to behave more aggressively in romantic relationships (Mescher & Rudman, 2014). |

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| **4 Preparation before conflicts** |

Finally, you need to develop strategies to manage conflicts as effectively as possible. The following table presents a few insights.

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| Recommended practice | Justification or clarification |
| Refrain from the temptation to change or convince the other person. Instead, merely express your feelings or opinions | * You should even concede that you are not sure and, for example, say “Of course, I’m not certain, but I do feel that sometimes we should…” * Attempts to convince the other person with logical, compelling arguments can actually provoke a defensive response |
| During a conflict, one of you should ask “What do you feel someone watching us would say”. | * When people imagine an event from the perspective of someone else, the intensity of their emotions tends to diminish |
| Over time, develop a list of funny moments you have shared in the past—as well as a list of the two to four strengths in your relationship | * Moments in which you reminisce about funny moments you shared in the past can evoke laughter. This laughter can enhance a feeling of connection and trust. * After people consider the strengths of their relationship, they can manage problems more effectively |
| During conflicts, designate a time limit—such as 60 minutes. After this time, read the list of funny moments or strengths together, at least for a few minutes |  |

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| **References** |

Finkel, E. J., DeWall, N. C., Slotter, E. B., Oaten, M., & Foshee, V. A. (2009). Self-regulatory failure and intimate partner violence perpetration. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 97, 483-499.

Mescher, K., & Rudman, L. A. (2014). Men in the mirror: The role of men's body shame in sexual aggression. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40(8), 1063-1075. doi: 10.1177/0146167214535641