

Six practical steps to SAVE (and IMPROVE) YOUR RELATIONSHIP

**(and one extra step
for desperate situations)**

Prepared by Menstime



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Six Practical Steps *quick summary*

Be positive – there's good reason to be

Most people see a good relationship as essential to a happy and fulfilling life. The good news is that despite how bad things might seem for you now, many people successfully work through their problems. Stay focused on the fact that a successful relationship is not only possible, it's widespread. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Be proactive in your relationship

Good relationships don't just happen; they must be worked on. Isolate the problems, define your objectives, identify the best strategies for getting there, then ensure they are implemented and followed up – just the procedure you might adopt, for example, in tackling a work related problem. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Communication is the key

No relationship can succeed without effective communication that allows each partner to be heard and acknowledged. Learning communication can be hard work, but if you want to preserve and enhance your relationship, it's essential. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Understand her – understand yourself

You can't give her what she wants out of the relationship if you don't understand what she wants. Nor can you get what you want yourself, if you can't express your needs clearly. So your first step should be to get to know your partner and yourself. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

Value yourself

Take care of yourself, including giving yourself time to recharge. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

You take the first step

Take the first step yourself, even if she isn't contributing. Because if no-one takes the first step, no steps will be taken. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

The extra step for desperate situations

There's only one thing you can do. Talk. But when the going gets tough, you can call in outside help. [Click for more](#), including practical tips.

1. Be positive

there's good reason to be

Most people agree that a good relationship contributes to a happy and fulfilling life. So it's worth working at.

Despite how bad things might seem for you now, many people successfully work through their problems. It is achievable for you too.

There's always plenty of negative information about, and bad news seems to make the headlines. It's up to you which you focus on.

If you want to preserve and enhance your relationship, stay focused on the fact that a successful relationship is not only possible, it's widespread. You can do it.

TIPS for being positive

- ✓ Choose who you associate with. If you spend your time with men who are bitter about failed relationships, it will be hard for you to shrug off their negativity.
- ✓ Talk with people you know have satisfying relationships. Maybe you can ask them for tips, but it's good just to spend time with people who are satisfied with their relationships and their lives.
- ✓ Read practically-oriented relationship books and articles. You won't agree with everything they say, but the reading, thinking and learning about relationships will help you stay optimistic.
- ✓ Find someone you can talk with about relationships, or consider joining a MensTime group or seeing an Anglicare relationships counsellor.
- ✓ Focus on the things you have achieved and draw encouragement from. Learn from your failures, but move on.
- ✓ Share your optimism with your partner and encourage each other. Some possible lines:

“We can sort this out.”

“We’re learning something here, aren’t we?”

“I’m really glad we’re doing this (seeking help, finding time to talk).”

2. Be proactive in your relationship

A good relationship won't just happen. You have to make it happen.

You have to be proactive in doing the things which will build the changes and values you want.

Like most things, you'll get there faster if you're clear about what you want and you have a strategy for achieving it.

When you reach your goal, don't stop working on your relationship. It needs maintenance, especially because people and their needs change over time.

TIPS for being proactive in your relationship

- ✓ Talk with your partner about the ways in which she would like to improve your relationship. Be sure you understand what she wants.
- ✓ Explain clearly what you want.
- ✓ Agree on ways of working towards these goals.
- ✓ Identify what you both need to learn.
- ✓ Most probably one of your tools (and goals) will be spending more time together. Create ways of setting aside time for your relationship, so that it is not eaten up by work or other “emergencies”. If the loss of a set time cannot be avoided, negotiate a replacement time.
- ✓ The passionate, romantic love of an early relationship soon gives way (if the relationship is to grow) into a love based more on sharing and companionship. This is most often the part you have to work on.
- ✓ The natural ebb and flow of physical passion doesn't have to mean the end of romance. Remember the things you did in the beginning, whether it was bringing her flowers or going to the movies? And not just the things you did, but the way you were on your best behaviour, paying close attention to her? You can preserve and rebuild that romance, by continuing to woo her. Ask her out on a date. Set your goals to please and impress her. Be on your best. Appreciating her may help her appreciate you.

- ✓ A feeling of being “taken for granted” is a sure indicator of a relationship in which one or both parties have stopped working at it.
- ✓ Have you got mutual interests that can be developed? Such as gardening, camping, walking, music etc etc.

3. Communication is the key

If you want your partner to understand your point of view, you have to tell her what it is. If you want her to help you get what you want out of the relationship, you have to tell her what you need. You must explain yourself. Be clear, precise and realistic. No partner can read your mind.

If you want to understand your partner (and that's essential for relationship success) you must listen and question – but not at this point challenge – and acknowledge the legitimacy of her views, *even if you don't agree with them.*

Take time to talk with your partner. Listen closely. Express yourself clearly. There is no substitute.

TIPS for better communication: talking to her

- ✓ Think through in advance exactly what it is you want to say. Condense it to perhaps three to five key points. Write them down.
- ✓ Are your points reasonable? Are they consistent with each other and with other aspects of your relationship?
- ✓ Just how important is each point, in the context of your relationship? Are some aspects negotiable, or perhaps non-critical?
- ✓ Are you sure this is what you really want (it's not some kind of debating position, or an assertion of your rights, or an attempt to make yourself look better)?
- ✓ If you have a friend you can comfortably discuss this with, explain your points to them and question them to see if they easily – and correctly – understood you. Do they think you are being reasonable and realistic?
- ✓ For most people serious talks work out better if they are flagged in advance. (Can we make a time to talk?) If they aren't, your partner may feel ambushed or trapped. Sometimes too they can bring more to the discussion if they've had time to think.

- ✓ Flagging a talk is especially important if there is a hostile atmosphere, as it suggests the subject can be talked about in a controlled way, rather than arising out of raised emotions.
- ✓ Possible lines:
 - ‘I want to talk with you about this issue. Could we do that tonight?’
 - ‘I want to explain myself to you about this. Can you set aside some time when we can talk about it?’

TIPS for better communication: listening to her

- ✓ Ask her what she thinks and feels about the issue. Then sit back and listen without interrupting.
- ✓ Ask her questions about what she says, and try to understand how it looks to her.
- ✓ If it helps, imagine it’s just like negotiating something at work. You know each party has some different objectives and views, but you’re looking for the common ground on which you can build a win-win situation.
- ✓ If there is a background of hostility and distrust, expect your new approach to be treated with suspicion, as though it might be a trap. Don’t give up the first time. Or the second.
- ✓ Stick to seeking information. Don’t challenge or argue or demand justification. Put those thoughts on a list for another discussion. Make it clear that for the moment you only want information to help you understand.
- ✓ Try setting ground rules. Say something like, “I’m not really clear what your point of view is in this. Can you spend some time just explaining it to me? It would help me if we focused just on that.”
- ✓ Make sure you’ve allowed enough time. If you cut her off just as she’s starting to open up, it will feel to her like she doesn’t matter to you.

- ✓ Remember that not all of the issues that are important to her are to do with you, but you still need to understand them. This is the same for you. For example, you may have issues at work which affect how you feel and how much time you have to spare.
- ✓ Explaining your point of view to your partner is not something we are all trained in and it can be awkward. Take things slowly. It's easier to make a mess of things when you try too hard.
- ✓ Ask your partner to describe the things you do which cause her problems. You may have been causing difficulties for her without realising it, and she may have been incorrectly interpreting your behaviour as intentional.
- ✓ Try to work out how you would feel and act if you believed or felt the same way.
- ✓ Sometimes the attitude may relate to an activity; something your partner does, which makes no sense to you or seems unimportant, but which she values. Can you try the activity yourself? There is probably something you can read about the activity in the library, on the net or in a magazine. Perhaps there are values you have missed, which could help you appreciate what she gets out of it. Are you just being stubborn about something you really know nothing about and have no interest in trying? Is that fair?
- ✓ Understanding how another person thinks and feels is one of the hardest relationship challenges, because we tend to project our own mental make up onto others and dismiss reactions that are outside our experience. If you don't understand an attitude in your partner, maybe you need to simply accept it at the moment to compensate for this tendency to ignore what we don't understand.
- ✓ Values are possibly the most difficult difference of viewpoint to come to grips with. Perhaps you think that the disciplines of team competition are essential to developing character in boys, but she thinks they are just a slightly dangerous way of blowing off excess aggression. Or you can't understand how she can attach so much importance to sticking to the family budget. Respecting her opinion means accepting her viewpoint and working in with it. After all, that's

what you are trying to get her to do, in relation to your viewpoint.

- ✓ Appreciate the differences. You wouldn't want a partner who was just a reverse sex copy of yourself. Growth and continued interest in life depends on being open to some new things: if you get some of them from your partner, it can strengthen your relationship.
- ✓ If there are several factors, ask if any of them are more or less important than the others, and if any of them are critical.
- ✓ Try testing your understanding with a few predictions. For example, "Does that mean that if (such and such happened) you would (do/feel such and such)?"
- ✓ Conclude with a summary which reiterates what she has told you, without judgement. Say something like. "So – please correct me if I'm wrong – how you feel about this is..."
- ✓ When she confirms that you've got it pretty much right, thank her. You might suggest another time to discuss things further, when you've had time to think about what she's said.
- ✓ Don't underestimate the benefits of listening to the experience of others when you're in a bind. You've had that argument, but you're supposed to go out to a party and put on a happy face amongst friends. You don't want to go, but the alternative is staying in the house with the tension. Somehow you find relating to friends at the party pulls you both through and makes you appreciate what you've got together. Sometimes you can see the argument in a different light, looking at it again with the benefit of hindsight - and some healing takes place.

4. Understand her – understand yourself

In fairy tale romances, lovers automatically know and understand each others needs. In real life, each partner has an ongoing responsibility to communicate clearly what it is they want, and to work at understanding what their partner wants.

There are two parts to this: understanding her – and understanding yourself. Both require you to deliberately focus on the task and work at it.

To understand your partner you must talk with her and ask about her feelings, perceptions and expectations.

To really understand what you want from your relationship, work in advance on saying – or writing out – exactly what it is you feel. Speaking or writing helps to clarify your thoughts, just like reviewing and refining a process at work.

TIPS for understanding her

- ✓ Ask her what she thinks and feels about the issue. Then sit back and listen.
- ✓ Ask her questions about what she says, and try to understand how it looks to her.
- ✓ If it helps, imagine it's just like negotiating something at work. You know each party has some different objectives and views, but you're looking for the common ground on which you can build a win-win situation.
- ✓ If there is a background of hostility and distrust, expect your new approach to be treated with suspicion. Don't give up the first time, or the second.
- ✓ Stick to seeking information. Don't challenge or argue or demand justification (you can do that in another session). You only want information to help you understand things from her perspective.

- ✓ Remember that not all of the issues that are important to her are to do with you, but you still need to understand them. This is the same for you: for example, you may have issues at work which affect how you feel, that are not directly related to her.

TIPS for understanding yourself

- ✓ Think about your upbringing and personal history and how it has shaped your assumptions, expectations and attitudes to relationships. There is often a lot to learn about ourselves from our background. Talking things over with a counsellor, attending MensTime groups, and learning by reading appropriate books, are all useful tools for expanding your understanding of your personal journey from childhood to manhood.
- ✓ Think through in advance what it is you want out of your relationship, and life.
- ✓ Condense what you want to perhaps three to five key points. Write them down.
- ✓ Identify the changes in your relationship which would give you greatest satisfaction.
- ✓ Be realistic: aim for goals that could be achieved in weeks or months, rather than for some remote ideal.

5. Value yourself

Your first relationship is with yourself. It's hard to have good relationships with others if you're not happy with yourself.

Take care of yourself, including giving yourself time to recharge your battery. Start thinking about what you want and need to do to look after yourself better.

Don't disappear into the roles of husband, father and provider: maintain your individuality. In the busy-ness of life, it is very common for men and women to do this, often without realising it. That hobby you used to enjoy, that regular quiet walk along the beach, that time you spent reading; are often the first things to go when other responsibilities start to compete with your time.

We can get caught up in trying to live up to the expectations of our parents, or our partner. Sometimes these become anchors not inspirations. Work to understand these issues in a MensTime group or with a counsellor.

TIPS for valuing yourself

- ✓ If you set yourself up as infallible and perfect, you're going to have a hard time living up to yourself. Acknowledge that you're not perfect and you sometimes make mistakes. It'll take a load off your shoulders.
- ✓ People need some time alone and some privacy. Negotiate mutual private time and respect for each others privacy.
- ✓ Your partner may be the most important relationship in your life, but she can't be the only one. Nurture other relationships as well, with friends and family. They refresh you emotionally and provide a balance and perspective to your partner relationship.

6. You take the first step

Pride is one of the great relationship destroyers. It's easy to feel wronged, neglected or insulted and to demand (silently) that she makes the first move.

Or to believe that you have tried and she hasn't, so now the ball is in her court.

The pride of not wanting to be the first to "give in" has to be weighed against the value of the relationship. Because if both of you maintain your stand-off for long enough, the relationship will be over.

If you value the relationship, swallow hard and make the first move. And the second, if necessary. This is what all that stuff about "commitment" actually means.

TIPS for taking the first step

- ✓ If there is a background of hostility and distrust, you can expect your first step to be treated with suspicion. Don't give up.
- ✓ Remember that a good relationship is bigger and more important than one issue. You want to resolve the issue but the first priority is the relationship.
- ✓ Acknowledge that you might be at fault, at least a little bit.
- ✓ Realise that, from her point of view, you may be totally to blame. An opening ambit claim or broad statement that you think generously acknowledges mutual fault may be perceived as an attempt to share blame. Focus on solutions.
- ✓ Be up front about your concerns and especially your desire to preserve the relationship. *Tell her.*
- ✓ Some possible opening lines:
 - "I'm really worried about this issue. Can we talk about it?"
 - "You know, you're far more important to me than this issue."
 - "I'm feeling a bit silly about this issue. Can we sort it out?"

- ✓ God made chocolate, flowers and perfume to help men through situations like this. In an act that might be interpreted as empathy, He even made them available to people who don't believe in Him. You might write on the card, "I love you, can we make up?"

7. The extra step for desperate situations

If the situation is desperate, all else has failed, but you want to save the relationship: well, you can always talk with each other.

From marital disputes to wars, all human conflicts are ultimately resolved in one of only three ways:

- Complete dominance of one party.
- A stand-off (which may become permanent).
- Negotiation.

The negotiation can be extremely tough and it can take a long time, but ultimately, if the relationship is to continue, it is the only viable option – for countries as well as couples.

Of course, you can't call in an international peace keeping force to settle things down. But you can get professional help to guide you through the toughest parts.

TIPS for desperate situations

- ✓ Establish a clear mutual commitment to a positive outcome.
Some possible lines:
“Look, this situation is bad for both of us. I want us to resolve it and continue our relationship in a better way. Is that what you want too?”
“This is clearly a problem. Can we work on it together?”
“I don't like being in conflict with you. I love you. Can we find a way through this?”
- ✓ Negotiate a clear space for working on the problem and establish the rules of engagement. For example, you should approach the discussion free of any specific argument, and agree not to shout or blame, but to listen without interrupting to the other person's point of view.
- ✓ In the first instance, agree not to argue back, to challenge or to defend your position. Focus on getting it out in the open and fully understood how each of you sees the situation. Then you can proceed on the basis of understanding.

- ✓ You might find it helps defuse the emotional charge of the situation if you agree to discuss it *as if it were someone else*. For example, you might say, “Someone once said that...” Your partner might say “Someone else told me...” This could lead to, “I wonder if it would help them if...” (If you end up laughing at yourself for playing this silly game, the humour won’t do you any harm either.)
- ✓ Professional counselling help is a real option, *if* you both have a commitment to reaching a positive resolution. If counselling is forced on one or both partners, if one partner wants to leave and the counselling is really about changing their mind, or if one party is convinced it won’t work and is only going through the motions, then a worthwhile outcome is unlikely. If you both want it to work but you can’t find the right way to go about it, professional counselling can be a real help.

About MensTime

A lot of men feel they can't talk with others about their problems, and they don't trust counsellors. That's why we wrote this series of booklets, and made it available anonymously over the internet.

But we know that talking with other men in groups *does* help. It makes men stronger, not weaker. Of course it can be hard to make that first move, and maybe some people would laugh at you if they knew – but it's not their life.

You won't be laughed at in a **MensTime** group. You will be heard and maybe even understood. Chances are, you'll end up getting a better handle on your life, as do most men who attend.

- **MensTime** provides group meetings and resources for men to deal with issues such as parenting, relationships and personal development.
- **MensTime** Group Programs allow men to take stock, affirm who we are and reclaim our unique contribution to relationships, families, the workplace and society.
- **MensTime** is time out, for men to reflect on the important issues of life.
- **MensTime** is for men, because we believe it's time to recognise the needs and contributions of men.
- **MensTime** is an opportunity for men to enhance our relationships and our parenting.

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Gender specific pronouns

This publication looks at communication within male/female partnership relationships from a male perspective. The authors acknowledge that other types of relationships exist. Many of the principles used here are probably applicable across all forms of relationships, however the authors however do not profess expertise in other types of relationships.

