

# 12 Simple Steps for a Sustainable Relationship

**Harriet Lerner, Author of *Marriage Rules: A Manual for the Married and Coupled Up***

**1. Respect Differences.** We all view reality through different filters depending on our culture, gender, birth order, genetic makeup, and unique history. A good relationship requires us to stay emotionally connected to a partner who thinks, feels, and reacts differently, without needing to change or fix him or her up.

**2. Warm Your Partner's Heart.** Make a concerted effort to focus on the positive and do the little things that make your partner feel loved, valued, and special. This may feel impossible when you feel like the wronged party and you have a long list of legitimate complaints. Actually, it's not impossible. It's just extremely difficult.

**3. Good is in the Details.** Be intentional about making specific positive comments ("I loved the way you used humor to deal with your brother on the phone tonight.") After all, you have no trouble being specific about the negative ("Why are you putting so much water in the pot for the pasta?")

**4. Dial Down the Criticism.** Many people value criticism in the early stage of a relationship, but become allergic to it over time. Remember this: No one can survive in a marriage (at least not happily) if they feel more judged than admired. Your partner won't make use of your constructive criticism if there's not a surrounding climate of admiration and respect.

**5. Apologize.** You can say, "I'm sorry for my part of the problem" even if you're secretly convinced that you're only 37 percent to blame. The failure to initiate repair attempts -- or the failure to respond to a partner's attempt to offer the olive branch and move forward -- are flashing red lights in marriage.

**6. Don't Demand an Apology.** Don't get into a tug of war about his or her failure to apologize. An entrenched non-apologizer may use a nonverbal way to try to defuse tension, reconnect after a fight, or show he or she is in a new place and wants to move toward you.

**7. Say it Shorter!** Many men tell me they don't like to talk when what they are really afraid of is getting trapped in a conversation that feels awful to them. Sometimes the culprit is the sheer number of sentences and the intensity in our voice. Slow down your speech, turn down the volume, and make your point in three sentences or less. It can be incredibly difficult to say, "I want you to say 'thank you' when I cook dinner." Or "This is the second time this week you forgot to take the garbage out," and leave it at that. Of course, longer conversations are sometimes necessary, but they'll go better if you practice lightness and brevity on a daily basis.

**8. Sweat the Small Stuff.** When you say you'll do something, do it! Never assume that your overall contribution to the marriage or household compensates for failing to do what you say you'll do, whether it's cleaning up the coffee grinds or moving your boxes out of the garage by Sunday. When your partner makes a reasonable request, he or she needs to know that their voice can affect you, and that they can count on you to follow through. Don't use your Attention Deficit Disorder (or any other diagnosis) as an excuse for not being accountable.

**9. Stop Being So Defensive.** Defensiveness is normal and universal. It's also the archenemy of listening. Enter a difficult conversation with the intention to listen only to understand -- that is, no interrupting, offering advice, defending your position, or correcting distortions, exaggerations,

and inaccuracies. Save your defense for a second conversation.

**10. Under Stress, Don't Press.** If you pursue a distancer, he or she will distance more. Consider it a fundamental law of physics.

**11. Know Your Bottom Line.** Be flexible in changing for your partner 84 percent of the time, but never sacrifice your core values, beliefs and priorities under relationship pressures. If you have an "anything goes" policy, your marriage -- and sense of self-worth -- will spiral downward.

**12. Think Small.** Pick only one or two of the above steps and try to maintain your new behavior for three months if you can -- or, if not, for 10 days. If you're too ambitious you'll give yourself an excuse to not change at all. Of course, you'll slip up now and then, but keep in mind that it's the direction you move in over time -- not the speed of travel -- that counts.