

How to Nurture Loving Relationships

What's the key to a happy and healthy life? In his [Ted Talk](#), *What Makes a Good Life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness*, researcher Robert Waldinger reported, *"The clearest message that we get from this 75-year study is this: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."*

Happiness expert Gretchen Rubin says, *"Ancient philosophers and contemporary scientists agree that strong bonds with other people are a key—perhaps THE key—to happiness. To be happy, we need to feel connected; we need to get and give support; we need to feel like we belong."*



Image Source: Unsplash

Aside from romantic relationships, we all have so many other types of relationships in life, such as relationships with parents, siblings, friends, colleagues, bosses, classmates, and neighbors. These are all opportunities to build better relationships and hence happier and healthier lives.

So how can we nurture loving relationships? This is a big topic, but we can break it down into three parts:

1. **Foundation:** Accept and value them for who they are
2. **Growth:** Use the Five Love Languages and the Four Methods of Guidance
3. **Preventing Failure:** Build your conflict resolution skills

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Part 1 - Foundation: Accept and Value Them for Who They Are

Deep down, every human being just wants to be seen, accepted, and loved unconditionally for who they are.



Image Source: Unsplash

Accepting and valuing others for who they are is easy to say, but it takes conscious effort to do. We need to

1. Learn about them more
2. Bring out their strengths
3. Appreciate their contribution

Marriage researcher John Gottman found that in happy marriages, there's a **magic ratio of 5:1**, meaning for every negative interaction, there are at least 5 positive interactions. When we do any of these three things, we are adding positive interactions. Doing the opposite of these things, namely showing disinterest in them, criticizing their weaknesses, and taking them for granted, would of course hurt the relationship.

1.1 Learn about them more (and yourself)

Firstly, you can't value someone for who they are when you don't even know much about them. Just because we've known someone for a long time doesn't actually mean we know them deeply. It takes conscious effort on our part to learn about others more deeply. Here are some great questions shared by motivational speaker Jay Shetty on this [podcast](#) that we can ask use to get to know others more deeply:

- Who's the most fascinating person you've ever met and why?
- What are you best known for among your friends?
- Where would your family be most surprised to find you?
- What's been the most significant plot twist in your life?
- If you unexpectedly won \$10,000 what would you spend it on?
- What's the most spontaneous thing you've done?

No matter how long you've known someone, there are probably still new things to discover about them. It's not the discovery of new things that's important, but rather showing your interest in them that is important. Discovering new things about them is just a likely side effect.

While learning more about them, you can also learn more about yourself. What are your values, strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes? When you understand yourself better, you can be a better partner, and you can help them understand themselves better too. I use personality tests like [16 Personalities](#) and [Four Tendencies](#). Some people also use [astrology](#). It doesn't matter what tools you use as long as you find it useful for understanding each other better.

1.2 Bring out their strengths

Second, we need to recognize and bring out their strengths. Remember that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses. If we always focus on and criticize their weaknesses, then the relationship is headed for disaster. If we instead focus on their strengths and help them bring out their strengths, then they will feel very happy and appreciative towards us, and we will come to appreciate them more as well!

Hopefully, you don't have too much trouble making a list of their strengths. If you do, it might be a sign that you don't know them well enough or that you're overly judgmental and negative towards them. If you need help recognizing their strengths, then you can use free personality tests such as [The Four Tendencies](#) and [16 Personalities](#), which tell you people's objective strengths and weaknesses based on their personality type. For example, some people are naturally very logical, while others are very empathetic. Some people are natural planners, while others are very spontaneous. Some people are naturally creative while others are detail oriented. Some people are naturally disciplined while others are harmonious.

We need to realize that different people have different personalities, and all personalities come with their own set of strengths and weaknesses. We can't expect others to be perfect, and we shouldn't use our strengths to judge other people. Instead, we should be like detectives searching for other people's strengths, and then be like cheerleaders in helping them bring out their strengths. When we focus on each others' strengths, we will be happier and stronger together.



1.3 Appreciate their Contributions

Motivational speaker Dr. Alan Zimmerman often says that the most common complaint in the workplace is,

"You could do a hundred things right and not hear a word about it, but as soon as you do something wrong, they point it out right away."

This applies not just to workplace relationships, but to all relationships. It's an awful feeling to be taken for granted and criticized for your occasional mistake. Everyone gives in their own way. Just like we should search for their strengths, we should search for their contribution and then appreciate them for it.

Often times, we want the other person to contribute to the relationship in a similar way to the way we contribute. For example, if you always cook, you might wish your partner would do some cooking once in a while. On the other hand, your partner is thinking he always cleans the bathroom, and he wishes you would do it once in a while. So the key here

is to search for all the ways they contribute and then appreciate them for it. Not only does it help them feel appreciated, but it helps us feel grateful.

To give workplace example, maybe your teammate is doing a lot less work than you, and they make many mistakes. Rather than focusing on his problems, ask yourself what he is contributing to the team and what are his strengths? When you appreciate him for his contributions, he will naturally want to contribute more. But if you criticize him, he will feel unhappy whenever working on the groupwork, which makes him want to do less.






Moreover, you may only be seeing his mistakes because you're using your strengths to judge his weaknesses. But maybe he's doing a good job in another area that you're not strong at, so you didn't notice it. When we focus on their contribution and strengths, we all feel better.

Now that we've laid the foundational mindset for building relationships, let's talk about actions we can take to raise relationships higher.

Part 2 - Growth: Use the Five Love Languages and Four Methods of Guidance

Gary Chapman, author of *The Five Love Languages*, explains that there are five different ways or "languages" in which people communicate love: Words of affirmation, Quality Time, Gifts, Acts of Service, Touch. The first four can be used for any relationship, but touch requires cultural and situational sensitivity and is best used for intimate relationships.

HOW TO SPEAK YOUR PARTNER'S LOVE LANGUAGE

WHICH LOVE LANGUAGE?	HOW TO COMMUNICATE	ACTIONS TO TAKE	THINGS TO AVOID
 WORDS OF AFFIRMATION	Encourage, affirm, appreciate and listen actively.	Send an unexpected note, text, or card.	Not recognizing or appreciating effort.
 PHYSICAL TOUCH	Non-verbal use of body language and touch to show love.	Hugs, kisses, cuddling.	Physical neglect or abuse.
 RECEIVING GIFTS	Thoughtfulness, make your Spouse a priority.	Give thoughtful gifts and gestures. Express gratitude when receiving gifts.	Unenthusiastic gift receiving, forgetting special occasions.
 QUALITY TIME	Uninterrupted and focused conversations. One on one time is important.	Create special moments, take walks and do small things with your partner.	Distractions when spending time together. Long time without one-on-one time.
 ACTS OF SERVICE	Let them know you are wanting to help, to lighten their load.	Make them breakfast or dinner. Go out of your way to help with chores.	Lacking follow-through on small and large tasks.

The Ladies Coach

[Image Source](#)

Chapman wrote his book in 1992, but interesting, 2500-year-old Buddhism has what's called "[Four Methods of Guidance](#)" for building relationships, and those four methods are basically the same thing as the first four love languages! That just shows this is really timeless advice that works for everyone. The Four Methods of Guidance are Giving, Loving Words, Beneficial Action, Activities in Common.

The Four Methods of Guidance for Building Relationships



Giving

Giving materials, time, energy, positive emotion, and useful knowledge.



Loving Words

Giving encouragement, appreciation, and admonishment.



Beneficial Action

Doing things to help them and relieve their stress.



Activities in Common

Joining them in activities that they like to do.

I like to think of the Five Love Languages as for intimate relationships and the Four Methods of Guidance for all relationships. When combine the two, we get

1. Words of affirmation (Loving Words)
2. Quality Time (Activities in Common)
3. Acts of Service (Beneficial Acts)
4. Gifts (Giving)
5. Touch

When we use the Five Love Languages and the Four Methods of Guidance, our motive should simply be to build a good relationship with them or to help them; it shouldn't be to expect something in return. If we do nice things with selfish intentions, the other person can feel it, and it would make them feel icky, which then hurts the relationship.

2.1 Words of Affirmation (Loving Words)

Words of affirmation are all about **encouragement** and **appreciation**.

When we encourage others, they will feel safe and comfortable around us, which nurtures the relationship. If we instead criticize them or put them down, they will feel afraid or defensive around us, which hurts the relationship. For example, let's say your partner started exercising. Words of affirmation might be "*Wow you've really shown self discipline! I'm so proud of you!*".

Appreciation is key in a relationship; as Dr. Alan Zimmerman says, "*All people wear a little, invisible sign around their necks. It says, 'Make Me Feel Important.'*" We should focus on all the ways the other person contributes to the relationship and thank them with specificity. For example, instead of just saying, "*Thank you for being a great mom,*" it's much more impactful to say, "*Thank you for always packing my lunch and cooking healthy and tasty food for me. I'm so grateful to have a loving mom like you!*"

Loving Words is anything spoken with a loving intention. It encompasses encouragement and appreciation, but it also includes telling them things that need need to hear, even if they don't want to hear it, but in a loving way. For example, maybe your partner really needs to fix some unhealthy habits. Loving Words would involve patiently and kindly reminding them to improve their health for their own benefit, so long as they are willing to listen. If they get extremely annoyed at your well-intentioned words, then the loving thing to do would be to not keep saying it to prevent resentment from arising in the relationship.

2.2 Quality Time (Activities in Common)

Quality time is about giving them your full attention. Going for a walk together and talking to each other is an example of quality time. Eating a meal together where you're both focused and engaged in conversation is quality time. But if one or both people are distracted on their phones, then it is not quality time anymore.

Activities in Common also says we should try to do the activities that they like doing to build more commonalities with them. For example, let's say your partner has a hobby that you don't have. One way to build the relationship is to join them in their hobby, even and especially if you're not that interested in it. After all, if you knew your partner was willing to do something they're not that interested in for the sake of keeping you company, wouldn't you feel extremely loved and valued?

2.3 Acts of Service (Beneficial Acts)

Acts of service refers to doing things for the other person to relieve their stress or to make their life easier. For example, maybe you help them do their chores because they are really busy right now. Or maybe you go do something that you don't really like, but you're willing to do it for them.

Beneficial Acts encompasses the meaning of Acts of Service, but it goes a step further to be about putting the other person above yourself. For example, you do chores for them because you wish to help them and you don't expect anything in return. You view it as your natural duty to help them in whatever way you can. It's similar to how a parent might stay up late at night doing things for children or how teachers work overtime for students without expecting anything in return. Because the intention is so pure, when the beneficiary eventually realizes, they feel extremely loved and valued.

2.4 Gifts (Giving)

When it comes to **gifts**, thoughtfulness is more important than cost. For example, if we know that the other person absolutely loves a certain bread from a certain store, then when we pass by that store, we could pick up that bread for them and tell them we got it specifically for them. When they can feel that we put in effort to pick something specifically for them, they will feel very loved. But if we get them an expensive gadget that they don't need, then they won't feel very loved.

Often times in relationships, people give big gifts once in a while, such as on a birthday or holiday. While it's not bad to give big gifts on these special days, remember that thoughtfulness is more important than cost, and also giving frequent small gifts may be more impactful. Why? Because frequent small gifts requires initiative, and it shows that we are *often* thinking of them, which makes them feel valued and appreciated. If you just give a big gift once in a while on these special days, then it just feels like you're doing it because you're supposed to, which doesn't feel as loving.

When it comes to **Giving** in the Four Methods of Guidance, there are actually four types of giving:

1. **Materials:** objects, money, food, clothing etc.
2. **Energy:** your time, attention, and energy; quality time, acts of service
3. **Comfort / Peace of Mind:** A pleasant facial expression; words of affirmation
4. **Wisdom:** teaching them useful things

When we talk about giving gifts, most people think of giving materials, such as food or clothing or jewelry. But there's a lot more we can give! We can give our energy and time, such as listening to them (Quality Time) or doing something nice for them (Acts of Service). We can also give them comfort and peace of mind by encouraging them (Words of Affirmation), giving them a pleasant facial expression, and reducing their worries. Finally, we can give them wisdom to improve their lives. As the proverb goes, *"Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."*

2.5 Touch

Touch refers to things like holding hands, hugs, high fives, kisses, massages, or even just being physically near each other throughout the day. For example, you could give your parents a massage to show your loving care for them.

Another example is sometimes couples just like to be together in the same room even if they're both doing their own thing. This doesn't count as quality time because they're not talking to each other, but it counts as touch in the sense that they want each other's presence. Generally speaking, this love language is more for intimate relationships, so use it with proper etiquette.

2.6 Learn Their Primary Love Language

Obviously, all five of the love languages (especially the first four) are great for building relationships. All people would appreciate any of the Four Methods of Guidance. But to go a step further in your most important relationships, find out which love language they like the most!

According to Gary Chapman, most people have a primary and secondary love language. You can have them take this [quiz](#) to find out their primary love language, or you can observe

how they like to give love and what they often request from others. We unconsciously to express love using our love language, but to really strengthen a relationship, we need to express love using THEIR love language.

For example, my primary love language is Acts of Service, while my mother's is Words of Affirmation. Hence, I tend to show love by doing things like chores or cooking, while she tends to show love by giving me words of encouragement and appreciation. While I certainly find it nice to receive kind words, to me, I feel really loved when she does acts of services for me. While she finds it nice that I do some chores, she is really happy when I give her words of encouragement and appreciation. That's the difference between using someone's primary love language versus a random love language.

Now that we know how to raise relationships up, the last step is to learn how to deal with conflicts such they we can continue to rise and not be dragged down by them.

Part 3 - Preventing Failure: Build Your Conflict Resolution Skills

American signer Dolly Parton said it well when she said, *"If you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain."*



Image Source: Unsplash

Just like how rain is part of the cycle of nature, conflicts are part of the cycle in relationships. Whether conflicts turn out to be good or bad depends on how we deal with them. If we lack conflict resolution skills, then conflicts hurt our relationships. But if we have good conflict resolution skills, then solving conflict can actually become events that

strengthen the relationship, and we get a nice rainbow after the storm. Here are six keys to effective conflict resolution:

1. Cooperation not Competition
2. Opportunity not Problem
3. Timing not Speed
4. Responsibility not Victim
5. Feelings First not Logic First
6. Inspire Change not Force Change

When we follow these six keys, conflicts become positive events that strengthen relationships rather than negative events that weaken them.

3.1 Cooperation not Competition

Motivational speaker Jay Shetty said to his wife, *"Remember, it's not me against you, it's us against the conflict."* After all, if you get what you want at the cost of their happiness, that hurts the relationship. If they're hurt, you should feel hurt too. If you feel happy at the cost of their happiness, how can you say you care about them?

A person once told me that she and her husband agreed that if they ever argue, they need to do it holding hands. This helps remind them that they are on the same team, and it helps them reduce conflicts and overcome them productively. What a great method!

3.2 Opportunity not Problem

Remember, conflicts that are solved well actually raise relationships higher. Hence, whenever a conflict arises, rather than seeing it as a "problem", see it as an opportunity to practice your teamwork skills and strengthen the relationship. It's thanks to this conflict that we can better understand each other and better meet each other's needs.

3.3 Timing not Speed

When problems arise, we often want to address it right away and solve it as fast as possible. This kind of attitude creates further problems. If they are busy or in a rush, then it's only going to annoy them, and there's no way you're going to solve the problem in a positive way.

We need to judge whether or not that moment is appropriate to discuss a problem. If it's not, then we should schedule or wait for a good time to discuss the problem, such as after dinner or in the morning of a weekend. Pick times when people are relaxed and clear-minded. A good beginning is halfway to success!

3.4 Responsibility not Victim

Playing the role of a victim would be blaming them and demanding them to apologize and fix our problems. That is immature because only we can change our lives, so the responsibility is on ourselves. Hence we need to focus on what we can do rather than on what they should be doing. By focusing on what we can do, we give power back to ourselves, which makes us feel happier and calmer. When we bring a happier and calmer energy to our interactions with them, they will naturally feel better as well.

We should take responsibility for our part of the problem first. As actor Will Smith said, *"If YOU are having difficulty with another human being...you are ALWAYS bringing poison to the party."*

Therefore, we need to become aware of how we are contributing to the problem and fix our part first. That requires us to understand ourselves and solve our own inner problems. For example, if you get irritated or emotional whenever a certain topic comes up, take responsibility for resolving that emotional discomfort within yourself.

We can always work on [improving our character](#). For example, rather than expecting others to improve, we can first improve our virtues, such as empathy, kindness, patience, gracefulness, humility, and trustworthiness. When we focus on improving ourselves, we even become thankful for them giving us this opportunity to train. When we improve, the problems don't seem to be problems anymore, and they just might get inspired by our example and improve themselves as well.

3.5 Feelings First not Logic First

"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

—Maya Angelou

When a conflict arises, our goal should be to help the other person feel safe and comforted, not to win the argument. If we try to win the argument, they will always remember the bitter aftertaste that we put in their mouth.

When conflict arises, it's easy to get lost in our own worries and struggles, but we ought to remember that they are going through their own hurt and challenges too. The best thing we can do is provide empathy, to acknowledge their feelings. This requires us to [improve our emotional intelligence](#).

Most seemingly logical conflicts are actually emotional conflicts. When people feel understood, tension and conflict often fades without needing to logically solve anything. For example, maybe your partner is complaining that you never cook for them. Logically, you might say I cooked that one time last month. Or you might say fine I'll cook for you this weekend. But the conflict is actually that they feel like you don't care about them, so the solution is to provide empathy. You might say, *"It sounds like you feel like I haven't shown that I care about you because I don't cook much for you, is that right?"* Even though that statement doesn't offer a solution, just by showing that you understand their feeling, their

will feel like their heart just had a knot untied.

3.6 Inspire Change not Force Change

When conflicts happen, we usually want the other person to change in some way. What we don't appreciate is that change is very very hard. Just think how hard it is for you to change a habit. Yet when we ask someone to change a few times and they don't, we get really upset at them and think they don't love us! We should instead reflect on ourselves and realize forcing others to change doesn't work. Instead, we need to inspire others to change.

How can we do that? There are five steps:

1. **Lead by example** – you can only ask of others what you already do
2. **Show genuine care** – they should feel that you have their best intentions at heart
3. **Teach/coach them** – people can't do what they don't know
4. **Provide encouragement, not criticism** – people need positive energy
5. **Be patient** – change takes time

For example, let's say you want your partner to give you more words of affirmation. First, do you give them lots of words of affirmation? If you expect something from others, first expect it from yourself.

Second, have you given a lot in this relationship to show that you genuinely care about them without any selfish motivation? Or do they think you're just a taker who rarely contributes?

Third, do they even know how to do what you want? Maybe they've never written a thank-you note before. Maybe they feel really awkward giving praise because they never do it. You need to teach them what you wish for them to do.

Fourth, when they do make an effort, make sure to praise and encourage them to keep doing it.

Finally, be patient. Don't demand people to change instantly. Imagine if someone has been slouching for years. You can't tell them to stand straight and expect them to be fixed forever. Even if they stand straight for a minute, their back will naturally go back to its normal slouching position. When that happens, we need to stay patient and remind them kindly. The same is true for habits of the mind.

For more examples on how to change others, check out this [article](#).

Conclusion

As the common saying goes,

"The quality of your relationships determine the quality of your life."

Nurturing high quality relationships requires us to

1. Start by accepting and valuing them for who they are
2. Use the Five Love Languages and Four Methods of Guidance to build the relationship
3. Overcome inevitable conflicts in a productive way to continue strengthening the relationship

One more big idea I'll leave you with is that we can even use these methods to improve our relationships with ourselves! That means learning more about ourselves, encouraging ourselves, appreciating ourselves, talking to ourselves with loving words, doing good things for ourselves, being patient with ourselves, and resolving inner conflicts productively.

Nurturing relationships take consistent work. As the saying goes,
"If you like a flower, you pluck it. If you love a flower, you water it daily."



[Image Source](#)

By following the teachings in this lesson, I hope you will be able to improve and nurture the important relationships in your life!