

## **7 Relationship Problems and How to Solve Them**

### **Here's how to resolve the most common relationship problems and get your love life back on track.**

By Carol Sorgen  
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Reviewed by Louise Chang, MD

It's the rare couple that doesn't, sooner or later, run into a few bumps in the road. If you recognize ahead of time what those relationship problems can be, you'll have a much better chance of weathering the storm, experts say.

Ideally, a couple should discuss certain basic issues -- such as money, sex, and kids -- before they decide to start their life together. Of course, even when you do discuss these issues beforehand, marriage (or a long-term, live-in relationship) is nothing like you think it's going to be.

In spite of the fact that every marriage experiences relationship problems, couples who are successful have learned how to manage them and keep their love life going, says marriage and family therapist Mitch Temple, MS, author of *The Marriage Turnaround*. They gain success in marriage by hanging in there, tackling problems, and learning how to maneuver through the complex issues of everyday married life. Many do this by reading self-help books, attending seminars, browsing articles on the Web, going to counseling, observing other successful couples, or simply by trial and error.

#### **Here are some common issues and ways to resolve them:**

##### **Relationship Problem: Communication**

All relationship problems stem from poor communication skills, says Elaine Fantle Shimberg, author of *Blending Families*. "You can't communicate while you're checking your BlackBerry, watching TV, or flipping through the sports section," she says.

##### **Problem-solving strategies:**

- Make time ... yes, an actual appointment with each other, Shimberg says. If you live together, put the cell phones on vibrate, put the kids to bed, and let the answering machine pick up your calls.
- If you can't "communicate" without raising your voices, go to a public spot like the library, park, or restaurant, where you'd be embarrassed if anyone saw you screaming.
- Set up some rules ... like not interrupting until the other is through, banning phrases such as "You always ..." or "You never ..."
- Remember that a large part of communication is listening, so be sure your body language reflects that. That means, don't doodle, look at your watch, pick at your nails, etc. Nod so the other person knows you're getting the message and rephrase if necessary, such as, "What I hear you saying is that you feel as though you have more chores at home, even though we're both working." If you're right, the other can confirm, and if what the other person really meant was, hey, you're a slob and you create more work for me by having to pick up after you, perhaps they'll say so but in a nicer way.

### **Relationship Problem: Sex**

Even partners who love each other can be incompatible sexually. Compounding these problems, says Mary Jo Fay, is the fact that men and women alike are sorely lacking in sex education and sexual self-awareness. Yet, having sex is one of the last things we should be giving up, says Fay, who addresses the topic in her new book, *Please Dear, Not Tonight*. "Sex brings us closer together, releases hormones that help our bodies both physically and mentally, and keeps the chemistry of a healthy couple healthy," she says.

#### **Problem-solving strategies:**

- Plan, plan, plan, Fay says. Make an appointment -- not necessarily at night when everyone is tired. Maybe during the baby's Saturday afternoon nap. Or perhaps a "before-work quickie," Fay suggests. Or ask Grandma and Grandpa to take the kids every other Friday night for a sleepover. "When sex is on the calendar, it increases your anticipation," Fay says, adding that mixing things up a bit can increase your sexual enjoyment as well. Why not sex in the kitchen? Sex by the fire? Sex standing up in the hallway?
- California psychotherapist Allison Cohen, MA, MFT, also suggests learning what truly turns your partner on by asking him or her to come up with a personal "Sexy List." And, of course, you do the same. What do each of you truly find sexy? "The answers may surprise you." Swap the lists and use them to create more scenarios that turn you both on.
- If your sexual relationship problems can't be resolved on your own, Fay recommends consulting a qualified sex therapist, who can help you both address and resolve your issues.

### **Relationship Problem: Money**

Money problems can start even before the wedding vows are said, from the expenses of courtship to the high cost of weddings. The National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC) recommends that couples who have money woes take a deep breath and have a serious conversation about finances.

**Problem-solving strategies:** The NFCC offers the following advice for having that much-needed financial conversation:

- Be honest about your current financial situation. If things have gone south, continuing the same lifestyle that was possible before the loss of income is simply unrealistic.
- Don't approach the subject in the heat of battle. Instead, set aside a time that is convenient and non-threatening for both parties.
- Acknowledge that one partner may be a saver and one a spender, understanding that there are benefits to both, and agreeing to learn from each other's tendencies.
- Don't hide income or debt. Bring financial documents, including a recent credit report, pay stubs, bank statements, insurance policies, debts, and investments to the table.
- Don't blame.

- Construct a joint budget that includes savings.
- Decide which person will be responsible for paying the monthly bills.
- Allow each person to have independence by setting aside money to be spent at his or her discretion.
- Decide upon short-term and long-term goals. It's OK to have individual goals, but you should have family goals, too.
- Talk about caring for your parents as they age, and how to appropriately plan for their financial needs, if necessary.

### **Relationship Problem: Struggles Over Home Chores**

Nowadays, most partners work outside the home -- and in today's economy -- often at more than one job, so it's important to equitably divide the labor at home, says Paulette Kouffman Sherman, PhD. She is the author of *Dating from the Inside Out: How to Use the Law of Attraction in Matters of the Heart*.

#### **Problem-solving strategies:**

- Be organized and clear about your respective jobs in the home, Sherman says. "Write all the jobs down and agree on who does what." Be fair: Make sure each partner's tasks are equitable so no resentment builds.
- Be open to other solutions, Sherman adds: If you both hate housework, maybe you can spring for a cleaning service. If one of you likes housework, the other partner can do the laundry and the yard. As long as it feels fair to both people, you can be creative and take preferences into account.

### **Relationship Problem: Not Prioritizing Your Relationship**

If you want to keep your love life going, making your relationship a focal point does not end when you say "I do." "Relationships lose their luster," says Karen Sherman, PhD, author of *Marriage Magic! Find It, Keep It, and Make It Last*. "So make yours a priority."

#### **Problem-solving strategies:**

- Do the things you used to do when you were first dating: Make gestures of appreciation, compliment each other, contact each other through the day, and show interest in each other.
- Plan date nights. Schedule time together on the calendar just as you would any other important event in your life.
- Respect one another. Say "thank you," and "I appreciate ... ." It lets your partner know that he/she matters.

### **Relationship Problem: Conflict**

Occasional conflict is an inevitable part of life, says New York-based psychologist Susan Silverman, PhD, but if you and your partner feel like you are starring in your own nightmare version of the movie *Groundhog Day*, it's time to break free of this toxic routine. Recognizing these simple truths will lessen anger and enable you to take a calm look at the underlying issue.

### **Problem-solving strategies:**

Conflict resolution skills can help you and your partner learn to argue in a more constructive manner, says Silverman, who offers this advice:

- You are not a victim. It is your choice whether to react and how to react.
- Be honest with yourself. When you're in the midst of an argument, are your comments directed toward resolution, or are you looking for payback? If your comments are blaming and hurtful, it's best to take a deep breath and change your strategy.
- Change it up. If you continue to respond in the same way that has brought you pain and unhappiness in the past, you can't expect a different result this time. Just one little shift can make a big difference. If you usually jump right in to defend yourself before your partner is finished speaking, hold off for a few moments. You'll be surprised at how such a small shift in tempo can change the whole tone of an argument.
- Give a little; get a lot. Apologize when you're wrong. Sure it's tough, but just try it and watch something wonderful happen.

"You can't control anyone else's behavior," Silverman says. "The only one in your charge is you."

### **Relationship Problem: Trust**

Trust is an essential part of a relationship. Are there certain behaviors that are causing you to not trust your partner, or do you have unresolved issues that are hindering you from trusting others?

**Problem-solving strategies:** You and your partner can develop trust in each other by following these tips, suggested by Fay.

- Be consistent.
- Be on time.
- Do what you say you will do.
- Don't lie -- not even little white lies, to your partner or to others.
- Be fair, even in an argument.
- Be sensitive to the other's feelings. You can still disagree but don't discount how your partner is feeling.
- Call when you say you will.
- Call to say you'll be home late.
- Carry your fair share of the workload.
- Don't overreact when things go wrong.
- Never say things you can't take back.
- Don't dig up old wounds.
- Respect your partner's boundaries.
- Don't be jealous.
- Be a good listener.

Although relationships have their ups and downs, there are things you can both do that may well minimize marriage problems, if not help avoid them altogether, says psychologist Karen Sherman. Be realistic. Thinking your mate will meet all your needs -- and will be able to figure them out without your asking -- is a Hollywood fantasy. "Ask for what you need directly," Karen Sherman says.

Use humor -- learn to let things go and enjoy one another more. And be willing to work on your relationship and to truly look at what needs to be done. Don't think that it will be better with someone else; the same problems you have in this relationship because of lack of skills will still exist.

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