

Research Based [Relationship Advice](#)

How to Avoid Relationship Meltdown

WHEN it comes to getting reliable relationship advice, who can you trust?

Everyone has their own opinion, usually based on bitter experience, or long-term love. So it's lucky that lots of research has been done in this area, and we're now able to offer relationship advice that's based on research rather than hearsay.

Read on for some remarkable relationship tips.

1) How to Tell If Your New Relationship Will Last

How you start discussions with your partner is absolutely vital in determining your future prospects together. It's not how much you argue, but how you argue that determines your relationship prognosis.

According to well regarded research ¹, how you conduct the 'startup phase' (the first two minutes) of disagreements or disputes reliably predicts your chances of being together 5 years later. Generally, the more negative emotions you display during this initial period, the more likely your relationship is to fail.

Apparently, the best predictor of a relationship that will survive is a female partner that can initiate discussion of a problem 'softly' (that is without negative emotion or criticism), and can then use humour to smooth the way as the discourse progresses.

The 'hard startups' that spell relationship disaster are:

A) Criticism rather than complaint

Attacking statements starting with 'you' are criticisms. A complaint would often start with an 'I' statement and be far less confrontational. Example: "You always spoil everything!" would be a criticism. Where as: "I really don't like it when you refuse to speak to my mother!" would be a specific complaint and not a global attack on the partner's character.

B) Defensiveness

Another major predictor of eventual relationship breakdown is over-defensiveness. If someone begins yelling as soon as their partner broaches a subject and feels overly threatened or attacked (whether or not they are being criticised or complained to) and this is a continuing and regular feature of the couple's interactions then the relationship is in crisis.

C) Contempt

Name calling, face pulling, cursing at, insulting your partner and basically behaving as if you are revolted by them can be termed 'contempt.' Again John Gottman and his researchers ⁽²⁾ in Seattle found that if this was a regular feature in the startup phase of a disagreement then the relationship's days were very likely to be numbered and the couple much less likely to last.

D) Withdrawal or 'stone walling.'

Emotionally withdrawing or stonewalling, 'closing your ears' or 'shutting off' when a partner is complaining is another huge predictor of breakdown. Whist criticising was generally more of a female trait, men used stonewalling more. The partner may withdraw during conversations by 'switching off' or ultimately spend more and more time away from the relationship as a way of 'escaping.'

Rather surprisingly, if even one of these factors (A to D) is present regularly in disputes, the outlook for the relationship is poor.

2) Men don't like unconditional love

The same team showed that a relationship is more likely to fail if the woman shows affection to her partner when he is displaying

negative emotions towards her. The advice says that an angry response to contempt from her partner is more likely to contribute to a healthy long-term relationship.

3) Do as you're told!

Another important factor for relationship survival is the man accepting suggestions, recommendations and advice from his wife or partner.

4) Don't get in too deep

Recent studies of elderly couples (a logical place to start when looking for good relationship advice!) has shown that these couples often don't listen very carefully to what the other is saying when expressing negative emotion.

They also tend to ignore their own feelings about the relationship unless they consider that something absolutely must be done. This threshold is set much higher than in younger couples.

So the typical advice of agony aunts to 'air issues' and get 'everything out in the open' doesn't, after all, make for healthy long-term relationships. Agreeing to disagree and knowing which subjects to steer clear of is a key relationship skill.

5) Avoid too much lovey-dovey!

Whilst physical affection is certainly important in a relationship, older partners in long-term relationships express less affection towards each other, whilst reporting a greater level of relationship satisfaction.

6) Change the subject

Another key factor in arguments within relationships that survive is the habit of changing the subject once the discussion has 'run its course'. This 'quick shift' lessens the amount of negative emotion experienced and decreases the likelihood of later rumination. It also conveys the message "We can argue, and still get on with each other." Thus, the argument is contained and does not contaminate the whole relationship.

7) Avoid too much big talk

It seems that younger couples are much more likely to consider their problems as highly important and to 'dig deep' into them, seeing their partner as at least partly responsible. Older people in successful relationships are more likely to keep their own problems to themselves, and if they consider them important enough to discuss will do it in 'small talk' fashion, rather than getting too worked up about them.

Relationship Advice Roundup

The great thing about this type of relationship advice is that it is A) reliable and B) able to be acted upon.

To improve the long-term prospects of your relationship, check whether any of the above factors are present in your interactions with your partner. If they are, drive them out! Have a zero-tolerance policy and come up with creative ways to approach things differently.

And you might want to have your partner read this article too!

Article by [Roger Elliott](#)

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- 1 - 'Predicting marital stability and divorce in newlywed couples', Journal of Family Psychology, March 2000.
- 2 - Responsive Listening in Long-Married Couples, Journal of Nonverbal Behaviour (Summer 1999)