Relationships (Interpersonal) Repository Practical Frontpage 111

Relationship Advice Repository

by **Ruby** 20th Jun 2022

Over the years, LessWrong has hosted some pretty great advice threads, including Best Textbooks on Every Subject°, Boring Advice Repository°, Useful Concepts Repository°, and Best Software For Every Need°.

Since relationships are extremely core to people's happiness and well-being, seems worth an attempt at collecting good advice on this topic too. I've been unsure how to structure this thread. What follows is my guest guess - we'll see how it goes.

How to contribute

Format

This is a thread of advice specifically about being in a romantic/sexual relationship. Probably a bunch of it applies to platonic relationships too, but a narrow focus seems better. Also, the thread is focused on BEING in the relationship, rather than seeking out a relationship.

Please contribute content in one of the following forms if you want it added to the main post.

- **An argument, idea, model, or concept.**
- **A verified story containing actions and outcome,** e.g. "I held off breaking up with my girlfriend for six months and this made things 10x awkward and worse". Longer stories seem good too but probably won't be added to the core post text.
- **A link to or quotes from an external resource** like a book, blog, or lecture; optionally with a review and/or summary.
- **A combination of the above.**

Content

I've seeded this post with a mix of advice, experience, and resources from myself and a few friends, plus various good content I found on LessWrong through the Relationships tag°. The starting content is probably not the very best content possible (if it was, why make this a thread?), but I wanted to launch with something. **Don't anchor too hard on**

what I thought to include! Likely as better stuff is submitted, I'll move some stuff out of the post text and into comments to keep the post from becoming absurdly long.

I think relationship advice is hard, and also that it's likely some of the best advice will be controversial. And also, of course, "consider reversing all advice you hear". I think the "final" version of this page should contain diverse and conflicting advice.

Please disagree with advice you think is wrong! (It probably makes sense to add notes/ links about differing views next to advice items in the main text, so worth the effort to call out stuff you disagree with.)

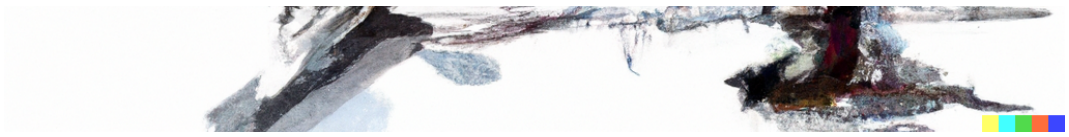
Ultimately, readers should apply their own judgment about what they ought to be trying.

How to submit content

1. You can leave a comment on this post. If you want to be anonymous, you can make an anonymous account, OR
2. Submit your content into this **anonymous Google form**

The main way to contribute to the post is the above two methods (commenting and using the Google form); however, the text of this post is publicly editable (just click that link). This is so that if the main text of the post needs editing (e.g. to update with valuable content), and the original compiler (me) isn't on top of it, other people can jump in and improve it. I'm likely to pay attention to this in the next two weeks (starting June 20th, 2022) and less after that. **Edited to Add:** Changes to the post won't go live until I or another admin presses "Publish Changes", a button that only we'll see when editing the post. Ping us if you've made edits.





General Advice

Introspection & Communication are Essential

There are many traits I like to have in a partner, but there are two which I think are essential and without which any relationship will really suffer:

1. INTROSPECTION
2. COMMUNICATION

Each person has to be able to know what's going on inside of them (wants/desires/emotions/etc) and be able to communicate about it. I think my good relationships have all had that, and my bad ones have lacked it in some way.

You can actually be a bit meta about it. It's okay if you don't know what you want or how you feel, so long as you know that you don't know and can communicate that fact. "Hey, sorry, I'm not sure yet what I'm after or if I want that; we can try and maybe I'll find out my preferences." Sentences like that are good.

A relationship is fundamentally a negotiated agreement

The defining feature of a negotiation is that it's an agreement either party can veto – so if the agreement is something you'd prefer not being in, don't be in it. The important thing about this is you shouldn't anchor on what "expectations of relationships are supposed to be like" and assume that's the only package on offer. Figure out the range of agreements that you'd be interested in and see if they overlap with the other person's, if they do, great! You have a good negotiated agreement.

At the beginning of a recent relationship, we just listed out all the things that we potentially wanted from the relationship. Each of us had a moderately long list, but there wasn't perfect overlap – and that was fine, we were both happy to have a relationship built on the things we both wanted and seek the other elements elsewhere.

From MNoetel°:

1. Emotion-focused therapy has *huge* effect sizes for increasing marital satisfaction (suspiciously huge). Even if you account for publication/other biases I'd still wager

it's one of the best rehabilitate and preventative interventions for couples (but it basically just pools lots of what you've discussed, like turning toward hard conversations and non-violent communication). This is the best book summarising it: https://www.amazon.com.au/Hold-Me-Tight-Conversations-Lifetime/dp/1491513810

2. My PhD student did a systematic review of randomised experiments to help people make relationship decisions (e.g., stay or go? if that link is still being minted, see here). Basically, there's nothing, except for helping decide whether to leave an abusive partner. But, the one study on non-abusive couples was interesting: if you flip a coin and do what the coin says, you're much more likely to be happy six months later. The most obvious explanation here is status quo bias: people are afraid of leaving but are happier once they do. If you're thinking hard about leaving, such that you'd be willing to do what a coin says, then probably just go. If you're not quite ready, I found the idea of setting tripwires (see Ch.11 summary here) helpful to make it clear what I want to see change without constantly shifting the goalposts on myself (e.g., if x doesn't happen in 3 months, I'm out).

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Balancing Each Other's Wants & Needs

Avoid the Typical Mind Fallacy

Honestly, being a good partner is so much just about overcoming the typical mind fallacy°: learning to model how your partner is different from you and how they want to be treated. Get to the point where you can move from the golden rule (treat them how you want to be treated) to the platinum rule (treat them how they want to be treated).

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Each partner needs to maintain their sense of self

One of the big challenges of an intimate relationship is you have a merging of "selves" to some extent or other, and **the challenge is for each person to neither have their own sense of self overwhelmed, nor overwhelm the other person's sense of self**. Even while you're caring about the other person's wants, you need to not forget yours. Even while you're tending to your own needs, don't forget the other's. This is challenging if the people in a relationship have unequal skill/comfort in advocating for themselves and/or felt need to please the other. (related: Leaving people with more agency)

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Bring the real you to the relationship

If you have to hide or pretend or cut off some part of you or whatever for the sake of

the relationship, because if they knew how you really are or what you really want they'd break it off or run away, or disapprove. **Then you already do not have that relationship; what you are doing is manipulating them into relating to a fake you**, i.e. you're hurting both of you (yourself by self-constraining, and them by robbing them of their agency and free choice).

(And yes, many relationships need *time to grow.* The claim here is not that you never hold back; sometimes a relationship is a sapling that can grow to take the weight of something and you're holding off so as not to prematurely kill potential. But like, that kind of thing should have known stop conditions.)

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Leave Someone Better Than You Found Them (excerpts from blog post)

That's the "campsite" rule, coined by Dan Savage and practiced by responsible lovers everywhere. It's a pledge to leave people in as good a state (physically and emotionally) as you found them.

There are clearly many ways to leave people worse. Not respecting boundaries, giving people unreasonable expectations and poor/inconsiderate communication are a few. While the importance of not leaving people worse cannot be understated—I'd like to consider what "better" would actually look like.

Leaving people with more agency

If someone leaves a relationship with more agency—more of an ability to use their voice—I consider that a win. Agency is like a muscle that we grow through things like speaking up and expressing what we want, and don't want.

Sharing your desires with a new lover is often a courageous act. It can be scary, because we may have been shamed for those desires in the past. When we accept our lover's desires with open arms, it will not only feel great, but it will make it a tiny bit easier for them to own those desires with their next lover. By repeatedly welcoming someone's desires—especially the ones that carry shame—we can help those people learn to accept themselves in a way that creates a new kind of safety and trust as they move through the world.

Celebrating the Word "No"

On some level, we're all people-pleasers. We want to be a yes to everything our partner wants because we don't want to be a party pooper, but that's not always what's true for us on a deeper level. Sometimes we're just a "no" and we need to honor that. What a great lover can do is not just listen to our "no" but encourage it.

Replacing "Yes" with "Fuck Yes"

One of the side-effects of creating a culture inside the relationship that welcomes the

word “no” is you begin to raise your standards for “yes”. For example—here’s something I often share with new lovers. I encourage us both to let go of “yes” meaning “I’m okay with it”, especially when it comes to things like pleasure, our bodies and sex. Instead, “yes” now becomes “fuck yes” and we only move forward with something when both parties are fully on board.

Leaving Yourself Better Than You Found You

One of the beautiful things about doing all this for someone else is you get to experience those lessons as well. Even though I’ve been “doing this for a while” I still struggle with everything mentioned in this essay. I say “yes” when I really mean “no”, I don’t completely own my desires and I settle for less than “fuck yes” all the time.

Comments

> Re ""“yes” now becomes “fuck yes” and we only move forward with something when both parties are fully on board."

I think this is good practice for relationships in early stages, and doesn't always make sense for later on. In particular, if you want to continue having sex over decades of marriage, expecting "fuck yes" every time will mean that at some point you're having little or no sex with your spouse. And I think the lower-interest partner should be free to decide they prefer to have sex they feel lukewarm about, just as they should feel free to watch a movie their partner loves even though they're not that into it.

Honesty & Communication

Collaborative relationships require honesty

A relationship should be collaborative optimization over the wellbeing of people in the relationship, and the thing about that is that **if you're collaborating, you really shouldn't be hiding pertinent information for the other person. That's kinda adversarial.**

One of my greatest feelings of guilt is from my first serious relationship when I was 18. The girl I was dating was really into me and told me she wanted us to get married a month after we started dating. I thought that was kinda crazy – we were 18, and also I knew she wasn't the one. But I didn't say that, because I didn't want to damage the relationship. I let her think we might get married for two years, and I'm pretty ashamed of that. It wasn't right to her.

You can be honest about feelings you're conflicted about

I was once very unhappy at a coworker but didn't feel like I should bring it up because I wasn't sure if I endorsed my feelings. Someone gave me advice they got from the Radical Honesty movement: **I should share everything I'm feeling, both the first-order emotion of anger and the second-order emotion of being conflicted over that anger.**

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Use a "Dating Doc" to set relationship expectations

This is related more to courtship/relationship initiation, but I think pretty relevant to communicating expectations/desires/intent in relationships is the new trend of people writing up **"Dating Docs" that describe what they're after in a relationship.** Here are some examples people were ok with sharing:

- *https://tinyurl.com/5n6nfpmn*
- *https://vaelgates.com/posts/VaelDatingAd.html*
- a Twitter thread with some examples.

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Reveal Culture◦ (and the other "cultures" too) [blog post]

I have things to say about the Ask/Guess/Tell Cultures model◦, and an addition/amendment to propose: Reveal Culture.

Cultures are built on shared underlying assumptions.

Ask cultures don't work if you're missing the part that says "it's totally 100% okay to say no." The **conversational strategies** associated with ask cultures require that **shared assumption**. All guess cultures, too, have shared assumptions at their core (although perhaps very different norms about how specific information is communicated). As do reveal cultures.

These assumptions, laid out below, have to do with what you can trust in the other person. To the extent possible, #1 in each case has to do with the other person's needs/wants, and #2 has to do with your own needs.

Ask Culture assumptions of trust

1. "If you need or want something, I trust you to ask for it."
2. "If I make a request that doesn't make sense for you, I trust you to refuse it."

Guess Culture assumptions of trust

1. "I trust that you will give me appropriate hints about your needs and wants and I

1. ~~"I trust that you will give me appropriate limits about your needs and wants and I~~ trust myself to notice & interpret them."
2. "I trust you to notice my subtle cues (indirect language and nonverbals) to what I may need or what, and to provide or offer it if possible."

(Many Guess-based cultures perhaps have other assumptions that are founded in part on the above two, such as "if you ask me directly for something, I assume that it's either of grave importance or that you're expecting that the answer is an easy 'yes.'")

Reveal Culture assumptions of trust

1. "When you share information with me, I trust that you're doing so sincerely and because you think it will be helpful for my model of you as a person and/or my ability to navigate this situation."
2. "When I share information with you, I am trusting that even if it is difficult for you to hear, it won't overwhelm you—that you'll be able to process it and make sense of it, possibly with help from me or others in our community."

I think that if you can't non-naively make these assumptions a decent amount of the time, then you don't have a foundation for a Reveal-based culture. If, in a given situation, for a given piece of information, you can't actually trust the #2 thing, then *you don't share that information*.

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If you want honesty, make sure not to punish it!

If you want people to best honest with you, it's really important that you not punish them at all for being honest! This can be really hard the truth reflects a reality you don't like. But suppose your partner wants time apart from you, it's better to know that than to have them be afraid to bring it up, then resentfully continue to spend time with you and the relationship degrading.

It's hard, though. My best guess is to always thank someone genuinely for being honest with you.

Steer towards forbidden conversations (excerpts)

I once thought it was a really good idea to sacrifice six months worth of two people's happiness in order to postpone an awkward break-up...Our relationship grew more strained. My affection started fading, so I faked more affection than I had, and this soured the affection that remained. She sensed that something was wrong, and made increasingly desperate attempts to connect. I grew disgusted with her inability to see through the charade even as I kept it going, as she struggled to heal a relationship that I insisted wasn't broken while subconsciously signaling that it was...What followed was one of the most difficult conversations I've ever shared. I broke up with her, and I can assure you that the pain and awkwardness that I hoped to avoid with my clever plan was realized tenfold.

Forbidden Conversations are those conversations that you just can't have, because they're too awkward. Think of a specific person close to you—a parent, a partner, a boss. Is there something you're hiding from them? Is there a conversation topic that you steer away from? Is there a revelation that you flinch to consider them learning? It is that mental flinch which demarcates a forbidden conversation.

One of the easiest ways to become more agentic is to train yourself to steer *towards* the forbidden conversations, rather than away from them.

Steering towards forbidden conversations is difficult, but I might be able to help by providing a few pieces of information.

The first is empirical: **after having a great many Forbidden Conversations on purpose, I can happily tell you that *they have only ever served me well.*** Having these conversations was very difficult, at first: my hindbrain would scream that the conversations were BAD, and pump my veins full of adrenaline while my mind searched frantically for excuses to delay the conversation until some other time. I'd have to manually force the words ("let's talk about our relationship," or something) through my lips.

However, in almost every case, having these conversations was not only less-bad-than-expected. These conversations proved *actively good*. I've spent the last few years actively steering towards the taboo parts of conversations, and this has served me well.

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Non-Violent Communication (NVC): List of Books

- Nonviolent Communication: a language of life - Marshall Rosenberg
- Living Non-Violent Communication - Marshall Rosenberg
- Getting Past The Pain Between Us - Marshall Rosenberg
- Graduating From Guilt - Holly Michelle Eckert
- The Surprising Purpose of Anger - Marshall Rosenberg

These are all almost the same book. They talk about the same thing (NVC) and the best is one of the top two. Don't let the name scare you, it's basically what you are looking for in communication (despite sounding like the opposite of what you want). If I had to pick one book that made everything all make sense, it's this one concept. If you are looking for the keys, look no further than here. If the name screams "useless" then hopefully it's time to wonder why I would suggest a book that sounds useless. Things that now make sense: Guilt, Anger, Upset, Resentment, Apology, Forgiveness, Sadness, How to talk about your interpersonal problems, How to meet your own needs and so much more. **If you only read one book, read this one.** I have probably spent 75+ hours on learning NVC this year, independent of the time spent thinking about it and practicing it in my life. – Books I read 2017 - Part 1. Relationships, Learning°

Summaries of Non-Violent Communication (NVC)

Summaries of Non-Violent Communication (NVC)

- Four Minute Books
- https://srinathramakrishnan.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/non-violent-communication-summary.pdf (7 pages)

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Don't use silence to communicate if you can avoid it

Ghosting (or distance generally) might save you an awkward conversation and potentially avoid someone reacting badly, but if there's any chance you'll continue to see the person again, you're just trading the avoidance of some upfront awkwardness for much more ongoing awkwardness. Decide if you want that. Preferably even if you decide to deescalate, you only entered into a relationship with someone who could take no/de-escalation well. If so, say something when you want to disengage. This is considerate and preserves what remains of the relationship, and will make it much easier to change your mind in the future if you ever want to.

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Conflict

Conflict, the Rules of Engagement, and Professionalism◦

One of the things that has been pretty useful for me in life, is a general heuristic of realizing that conflict in relationships is usually net positive. (It depends a bit on the exact type of conflict, but works as a very rough heuristic.) I find it pretty valuable too, if I'm in a relationship, whether it's a working relationship, a romantic relationship, or a friendship, to pay a good amount of attention to where conflicts *could* happen in that relationship. **And generally, I choose to steer towards those conflicts, to talk about them and seize them as substantial opportunities.**

I think there are two reasons for this.

First, if startups should fail fast, so should relationships. The number of people you could have relationships with is much greater than the number of people that you will have relationships with. So there is a selection problem here, and in order to get as much data as you want, I think going through relationships quickly and figuring out whether they will break or not is quite valuable.

Second, I've found that having past successful conflicts in a relationship is a very strong predictor for that relationship going well more generally, and for my ability to commit to the relationship and get things done within it. In fact, I find it a better predictor of my capacity to coordinate with that person than the length of the relationship, the degree to which we even enjoy spending time with each other, or other obvious indicators

obvious indicators.

Facilitated mediation is great! Have a low bar to get some

If you're having a gnarly conflict, **get mediation.** Even if it's just a trusted friend, having a third party present can help keep strong emotions from overwhelming the conversations by holding space, and the held space can help each party feel listened to and more comfortable expressing their feelings.

Don't think that your relationship has to be in a really bad place before you get couple's therapy – heck, do it proactively even when your relationship is going well!

Have an explicit negotiation at some point early on

There's a lot to be said for guessing games in courtship, they're a lot of fun – intrigue, romance, uncertainty – but **at some point I think there ought to be an explicit discussion of what each party wants.** I don't know if it should be the 1st "date", but probably before the 5th (by which time you're getting pretty invested), where you figure out what each party is there for.

Also! This shouldn't be a one-time final thing. I suggest people have periodic check-ins where they reflect on how they feel things are going.

Quite a few people I know have regular scheduled "relationship check-ins" to raise any problems and make changes as they feel are warranted.

You're not stuck with your relationship in one form forever!

You're allowed to change your mind! Unlike other kinds of "contracts" where there are commitment periods of months to years, I think in relationships a person should be able update to say "I want something different" and then ask for it immediately. That said, try to be moderately sure about things before you move in together, get married, have a kid, etc.

Comments

> Re "Unlike other kinds of "contracts" where there are commitment periods of months to years, I think in relationships a person should be able update to say "I want something different" and then ask for it immediately"

I'm not clear on whether this is meant to apply to marriage - I read it as including that. I think this is very bad advice for marriage, where the whole point is that you're not renegotiating all the time. I don't think people should be stuck forever (living in a city you no longer want to live in, being poly or mono when you don't want to anymore, being in the relationship at all, etc.) but in a marriage I think the process for renegotiating should be slower and more serious than "you're allowed to change your mind whenever and ask for it immediately."

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Take time apart

Sometimes to get perspective on your feelings about something, you need some distance from that thing. Wise people I've known have taken time apart before making big decisions (e.g. deciding to escalate a relationship). At my work, we always ask prospective hires to take a week (or month) off to reflect before accepting a job offer.

This matters. Other people in our lives affect how we think (for better or worse), so definitely test being apart periodically.

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Premortem as communication device (e.g. in relationship)◦

Premortem (aka Murphyjitsu) is "a process for bulletproofing your strategies and plans". (CFAR handbook). The idea is to first think how your plans can fail, then brainstorm ways to prevent these failures. For a deeper introduction please see Murphyjitsu section in the CFAR handbook.

My partner and I read the CFAR handbook together. We decided to do a premortem on our relationship. **This might have sounded awkward ("Let's brainstorm how our relationship can fail"), but keeping the end goal - improving likelihood of success - helped to avoid this pitfall.** Since then we did 3 premortems and converged to a following procedure...(go read rest of post◦)

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Emotional Intimacy

Share emotions while still taking responsibility for them

Not every relationship needs to have lots of emotional intimacy, but it's personally one of my favorite things. I **think something key allowing me (someone with strong emotions) to have this in my relationships is establishing that me expressing a strong emotion doesn't mean that my emotion is a "problem" that my partner is responsible for solving,** including if the strong emotion relates to them.

Someone once gave me the useful metaphor of imagining that your strong emotion is a small doll (like a ventriloquism dummy?). If you pull it out and throw it at someone else, they'll go "aaaahh!", but if you pull it out and place it on your own lap, you can show it to them without making it something they necessarily need to handle, you might even offer them to let them pet it. (Maybe the original metaphor was less weird and I'm just misremembering it?) You're saying "I'm showing you this important, vulnerable aspect of who I am, but I'm not making it any more your problem than you want it to be."

Resources I think have helped me with this are Acceptance & Commitment Therapy and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy – both good for taking strong emotions as object – and Non-Violent Communication, good for taking ownership of your feelings.

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Letting Others Be Vulnerable◦ (excerpts)

Social psychology tells us that relationships deepen with iterated sharing, as both sides open up and become more vulnerable. But what does all of that really entail? What counts as vulnerable? And when it happens, what does the whole deepening process feel like, to the two people in the relationship?

I think the first piece of the puzzle has to do with our internal models of others, i.e. the picture we have of them in our heads. The models we have are largely going to be based off of the edges the other person shows, as those are the most visible pieces of information. We're often incentivized to improve the models other people have us because said model shapes how others treat us. Their model will determine the predictions they make, the recommendations they give, and how they behave. The more accurate it is, we might reason, the better they can help us out.

One reason to share more, then, is that we're trying to give the other party a better picture of what we're "really" like, so that they can interact with us in more relevant ways. On top of this, I think we also like to feel validated—knowing that someone else has a grasp of all the things in our head can make us feel less alone.

When we start to share information about ourselves, though, it's likely not going to be stuff that makes us look good. Our best qualities are likely already on display at our edges. The stuff we keep beneath, then, is disproportionately likely to be the stuff we don't want other people to see (at least not immediately). Herein lies our fears, our insecurities, our prejudices, and our perversions. It's going to be things that are more likely to cause disagreement, to make people like us less.

This is the stuff we were perhaps hesitant to share at first because it likely didn't help contribute to a harmonious interaction.

It's strong, sometimes dark, stuff. For the person revealing such information, there's a lot of trust involved. **Vulnerability, I think, has a lot to do with how damning the information you're providing is.** When we share something that the other person could use to hurt us, we're demonstrating that we trust them. Though they *could*, we don't think

they *will*. It might still be scary (after all, there is still potential risk involved), but we're willing to swallow that fear.

From a feelings-based perspective, opening up can feel bonding. If you open up and the other party is receptive and acknowledging, you feel comforted. There's a feeling of security when you know that the person on the other side is willing to listen and accept whatever it is you tell them.

But for the receiver to be able to be accepting is where I think the second difficulty lies, and I think this part of the share/receive model of vulnerability has been given less attention.

End of Relationships

Be prepared for a breakup

For a relationship of any duration or seriousness, it can be well worth having a conversation up front about what would happen if the relationship ended. You particularly might want to have discussed this if you're living in the same house, working in the same work place, or have a lot of friends in common. Following a breakup, you might want a lot of space from your new ex and this might take some planning.

After a breakup, maybe get a bunch of space from each other

I don't know how broadly this advice universalizes, but **my experience is that when a relationship ends, I need to grieve it, and my brain gets really confused if I'm still hanging around the person I just broke up with.** I think it's nice and good and fine to be friends with an ex, but it might take 1-6 months apart before you can do that.

My big experience of failing to do this was with after my first major relationship ended I continued to be close with my ex for 6+ months. This basically super prolonged my grieving and made it really hard to move on. So I certainly don't recommend it.

Strategies and tools for getting through a breakup (excerpts)

I was very recently (3 weeks now) in a relationship that lasted for 5.5 years. My partner had been fantastic through all those years and we were suffering no conflict, no fights, no strain or tension...It was quite a surprise when my partner broke up with me one Wednesday evening...

Strategies (in order of importance) [abridged]

1. Decide you don't want to get back in the relationship. Decide that it is over and given the opportunity, you will not get back with this person. Until you can do this, it is unlikely that you will get over it. It's hard to ignore an impulse that you agree with wholeheartedly.

2. Talk to other people about the good things that came of your break-up. (This can also help you arrive at #1, not wanting to get back together) I speculate that benefits from this come from three places. First, talking about good things makes you notice good things and talking in a positive attitude makes you feel positive. Second, it re-emphasizes to your brain that losing your significant other does not mean losing your social support network.

3. Create a social support system. Identify who in your social network can still be relied on as a confidant and/or a neutral listener. You would be surprised at who still cares about you. In my breakup, my primary confidant was my ex's cousin, who also happens to be my housemate and close friend.

4. Intentionally practice differentiation. One of the most painful parts of a break up is that so much of your sense-of-self is tied into your relationship. You will be basically rebuilding your sense of self. Depending on the length and the committed-ness of the relationship, you may be rebuilding it from the ground up. Think of this as an opportunity. You can rebuild it an any way you desire.

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Consent

Stub. Needs more content.

How to Have Sex on Purpose [blog post]

(the most consent-relevant parts are further into the body)

A moment to talk about consent. Consent in BDSM is a really big deal, because the stuff we do would be torture without consent. It's sad that it's any different for sex, but not a whole lot of people could convince themselves "well, they seemed like they wanted to be dressed up like a ballerina and smeared with mashed potatoes, they did go up to my bedroom after all" to themselves. You've gotta be sure when you're doing kink. It's not just about having a good experience but about not committing a felony. Wait... isn't that true for sex too? Again. **If you wouldn't punch a person because you were kinda sure they wanted it, don't have sex with them either.** Just be like, "So... wanna fuck?" Gotta tell you, I haven't gotten a lot of "Oh, I was wet and humping your leg and imagining the things I'd do to you, but now that you asked, forget it," from that. I have gotten "no," but thank God for those "no"s! I'm especially glad I asked then!

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#350: Let's crowdsource some feminist sex ed for frat guys. [blog post]

If someone says no, freezes, pulls back, moves your hands away, goes passive or limp, or seems at all reluctant to do something or less than fully present, doesn't make any moves towards removing clothing, **stop whatever it is you're doing**. Treat "maybe" as "no." Let your partner make the next move, if there is a next move. **Trust that if "maybe" really means "yes," they'll find a way to let you know.**

This might feel awkward and uncomfortable at first because (heterosexual) men are socialized to be the aggressors who must "perform" and move the action along, and women are socialized to be more passive receivers. There's this (bad) cultural expectation that guys are always up for sex and will be pushy about it and women are gatekeepers and that sex is a favor they do for (or cruelly deny) to men.

Even when people know intellectually that it's bullshit, it's still very possible for that model to feel normal and even good when it plays out in the moment with someone you like. If you deviate from that script, you take a risk that your partner might not step so comfortably into the role of aggressor and that things might unfold more slowly than they otherwise would or require a lot more explicit communication. Trust that the weirdness is momentary. Trust that people who really want you will find a way to make it happen between you – if not Right Now, then soon. And honestly, if your partner is nervous or having second thoughts or worried about being pressured, being No Pressure Guy is the coolest and sexiest thing you can be.

• • •

Consent Once Doesn't Mean Consent Always

Things like "consent from one time and one context doesn't imply indefinite further consent" are very important to remember. Things change.

• • •

Polyamory

Polyamory takes what normal relationships do, just more so

Polyamory can be pretty good but I don't think it's always going to be easy. Multiple partners can allow you to get a wider variety of desires met (and have to say no less to things you want) but also jealousy is pretty bad and not trivially solved for everyone.

I think polyamory basically requires all the same skills as needed for monogamous relationships (communication, introspection), but more so – you're playing on hard mode with many people and their expectations/feelings in the mix.

Definitely be reluctant to "open up" long-standing monogamous relationships to poly. I've seen at least one marriage destroyed that way.

. . .

~~More Than Two – Franklin Veaux [Book]~~

~~*From — Models of human relationships - tools to understand people*°~~

~~This is commonly known as the polyamory bible. It doesn't have to be read as a polyamory book,~~ **~~but in the world of polyamory emotional intelligence and the ability to communicate is the bread and butter of everyday interactions.~~** ~~If you are trying to juggle two or three relationships and you don't know how to talk about hard things then you might as well quit now.~~ **~~If you don't know how to handle difficult feelings or experiences you might as well quit polyamory now.~~**

~~Reading about these skills and what you might gain from the insight that polyamorous people have learnt is probably valuable to anyone.~~

Elizabeth°: I would strongly recommend removing More Than Two from the post. The primary author has been accused of abuse by his co-author and multiple other long term partners (>50% of all long term partners he's had, maybe close to 100%). It's not clear to me his behavior meets a strict definition of abuse, but you can't get to this stage without some combination of "the relationships were terrible and he contributed to that" and "he has absolutely terrible taste in partners", and I think both are pretty disqualifying for a relationship advice guru. Plus, while I don't have any evidence other than his statements and theirs, the kinds of bad behavior they describe are extremely consistent with the failure modes of what he writes about.

. . .

I would recommend Polysecure over More Than Two [Book]

> Attachment theory has entered the mainstream, but most discussions focus on how we can cultivate secure monogamous relationships. What if, like many people, you're striving for secure, happy attachments with more than one partner? Polyamorous psychotherapist **Jessica Fern breaks new ground by extending attachment theory into the realm of consensual nonmonogamy. Using her nested model of attachment and trauma, she expands our understanding of how emotional experiences can influence our relationships.** Then, she sets out six specific strategies to help you move toward secure attachments in your multiple relationships. Polysecure is both a trailblazing theoretical treatise and a practical guide.

. . .

Blogposts on Polyamory by Ozymandius

~~Blogposts on Polyamory by Ozymandius~~

The blog Thing of Things by Rationalist Ozymandius has a bunch of relevant posts on polyamory. Probably just search for the best of them. Here are some I could easily pull up (probably not the best ones):

- **On Polyamory Advice**
- **You Don't Have To Be Good At Relationships to Be Poly**
  - *A lot of polyamory advice books are, frankly, terrifying. They make it sound like to be poly you have to be Emotional Competence Georg, who lives in a firm boundary and negotiates with his partners about 10,000 emotional needs each day.*

    So I would like to say something reassuring to my crazy friends: you don't have to be good at relationships to be poly. *It helps! It definitely helps! The advice in More Than Two or The Ethical Slut is good for people of all relationship styles, monogamous and polyamorous.*

    However, I am needy, whiny, insecure, and approximately as good at communication as a potted plant. And I have been poly for several years and it has worked out fine. *That's for a bunch of reasons. Polyamory is sometimes easier.*
- **Assorted Thoughts on Polyamory**
  - An odd thing about polyamory is that you can have your heart broken, be wanting to punch the wall and throw things and curse every time you hear that bastard's name mentioned while simultaneously being bubbly, giggly, happy, full of new relationship energy, tremendously excited by everything about this new person while simultaneously knowing that your rock is there, your secure base, who will always be there for you if you need them.

Providing Support & Expressing Love/ Affection

Love Languages (aka how to express and receive affection effectively)

Love languages is a neat concept – the way people experience and express affection can be different, so it's good to have a good model of your partner and what really reaches their heart.

Classically there are five love languages: words of affirmation, acts of service, touch, quality time, and gifts. In fact, I think there are many more.

One thing some people really care about is being "seen", having someone understand their

experience and anticipate their needs and desire. For others, it's feeling "wanted".

Personally, I realized relatively recently that playful teasing (or outright outrageous countersignalling) is important to me for feeling safe and comfortable and connected to someone; it really is one of my love languages.

• • •

Related to the idea of Love Languages is Personal User Manuals.

It's a concept I learned in the workplace, but it should generalize. For your friends, partners, etc., write up a document that explains your default personal culture and preferences: how you like to communicate, what makes you happy/unhappy, etc. etc. Seems worth doing for relationships.

• • •

Learn to Listen: Problem-Solving vs Support

This is classic advice but just always worth remembering. At different times and across different people, partners want different things from conversations. Model them!

A couple I know actually defined between themselves a few modes of nuanced support so they could say things like "Would you like support-style A or B right now?"

Image

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Warnings & Cautions

Being a savior is risky / Trying to fix others is risky

It's a not uncommon pattern for someone to see someone they're interested in struggling with a particular problem and think they can help them solve it. This is risky. Mixing your interest in someone with a desire to help them...it's tempting but I think sets up bad dynamics. It might involve escalating them while they're in a vulnerable state, it might cause them to end up feeling obligated to reciprocate romantic attention when they don't want to, or very likely, you're not actually in a good position to help them and understand what's going on less well than you think.

Six or seven years ago, early in one relationship the person I was with seemed to be struggling with psychological challenges I myself didn't have, so I thought I could just easily impart how I approached those topics and thereby fix her. But I didn't really understand and so instead I made it so she didn't want to talk to me about her challenges

for a really long time. I just didn't actually understand.

In another relationship, the person had not that long ago left a very abusive relationship. I thought that I could be the complete opposite – loving, caring, considerate. Except that I didn't actually understand how she felt or what she needed at that point, so my well-intentioned caring actually missed the mark and made her feel worse in many ways.

This isn't to say you shouldn't try to help others, but be careful when you're combining it with your romantic interest.

The other point to remember is that you can't really fix other people, definitely not despite themselves. You can at best help them help themselves, and if they don't want that, there's not obviously much you can do.

Probably don't make your relationship contingent on the other person changing

Sometimes you'll meet someone who you think you could potentially like if they were different in this one important way, if they just improved a little (or a lot), and you think you can help them make those improvements. I won't say this is never true, but it's an anti-pattern, for sure.

There's a kind of crazy book, The Mastery of Love: A Practical Guide to the Art of Relationship, that nonetheless has some spirit of wisdom to it:

"You cannot change other people [not literally true, but ok]. You love them the way they are or you don't. You accept the way they are or you don't. Try to change them to fit what you want them to be is like trying to change a dog for a cat, or a cat for a horse. That is a fact. They are what they; you are what you are. You dance or you you don't dance. You need to be completely honest with yourself – to say what you want, and see if you are willing to dance or not. You must understand this point, because it is very important. When you truly understand, you are likely to see what is true about others, and not just what you want to see."

The passage is literally true and loving someone because you want to grow alongside them and become more is great, but also there's some spirit in that passage that feels right to me though it didn't at first.

Have other relationships! Diversify!

Standard failure mode, especially for busy people, is to invest in their romantic relationship and neglect other social connections. Naturally a bad idea because you've got a single point of failure. What do you do if you're having a rough patch with your partner? What do you do if they're away or busy? What do you do if it ends?

Even when you're busy and super excited about your partner, nurture other friendships.

• • •

Thinking you're good at relationships is a recipe for not noticing when you're being bad at relationships

Believing that you are X, e.g. kind and thoughtful in relationships, and particularly priding yourself on it, is a surefire way to fail to notice some occasions when you are not being X.

Examples: empathetic, considerate, "rational", "I confront my problems head-on rather than avoid them".

Such failures to notice will be consequential.

Well, I dunno, has been true of me. I assume I'm not *that* special and this applies enough to enough others to be worth the warning. For a long time I've tried to pride myself less on various traits and behaviors, but therein lies the meta-failure I very much have committed: by believing I have reduced my pride, I fail to notice where I haven't.

Due to the above mechanics, I expect to be caught out failing to instantiate various traits that I valorize and have laid claim to. Not because I don't really want or value having the traits, just because noticing failures is hard. You can call me out on things when I'm not being who I like to believe or say I am; I will endeavor to be glad rather than mad. I hope you will forgive me if in my failures I have wronged you. - FB post

• • •

Sex

How to have good and healthy sex is beyond the intended scope for this thread, but I welcome people to add links to external resources here (or submit them via comments with spoiler text/warning, or the Google Form).

Let's just assume these are all NSFW (links hidden behind spoiler text cover)

Models and Concepts

Attachment Styles

Attachment styles is this relationship model that generalizes from infant attachment studies to adult relationships styles. The inference feels like wonky science, but I still feel like there's something to it. Quick summary of attachment styles:

Secure: a securely attached person feels comfortable and at ease-with the relationship. They seek and respond to bids for attention/affection in a way that's healthy for both partners.

Anxious-preoccupied: is anxious about the relationship and is preoccupied seeking reassurance about the relationship.

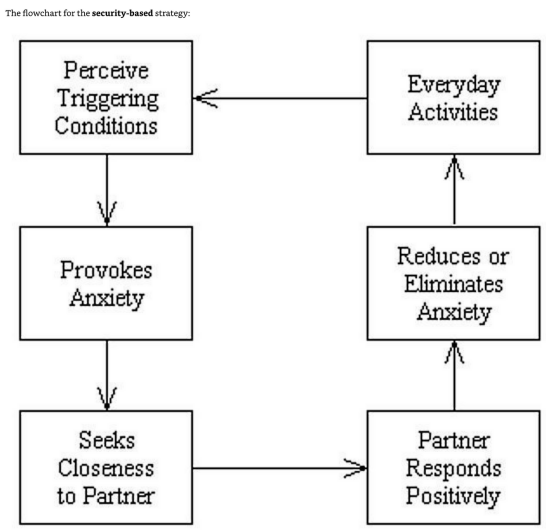
Fearful-avoidant: although they want the relationship on some level, they are afraid of the intimacy and "pull away"

Dismissive-avoidant: like the fearful-avoidant but more extreme, while they vaguely want the relationship they also kind of believe they don't need it and put up a lot of walls.

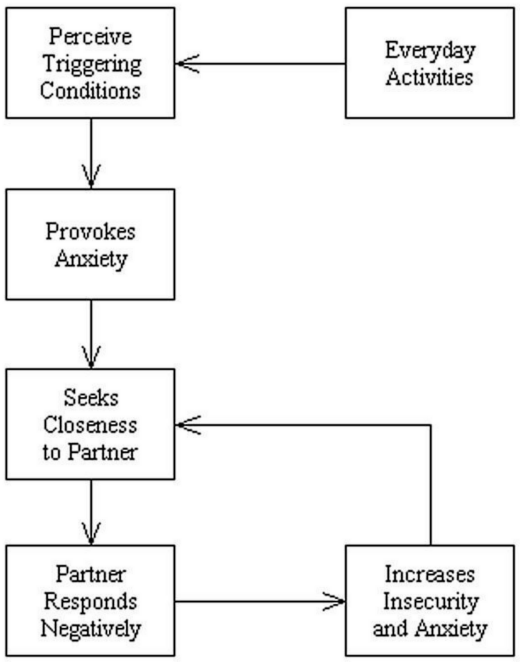
Anxious-preoccupied and the avoidants classically make for a bad dynamic. In one order or the other, you have the anxious pre-occupied pursuing reassurance and the avoidants pulling away, thereby inducing more anxiety in the anxious-preoccupied who pursues reassurance further, inducing more avoidance, etc.

These are more "patterns" of behavior than essential traits of people. Anxious behavior in one person can induce avoidance behavior in an otherwise secure person, and vice versa.

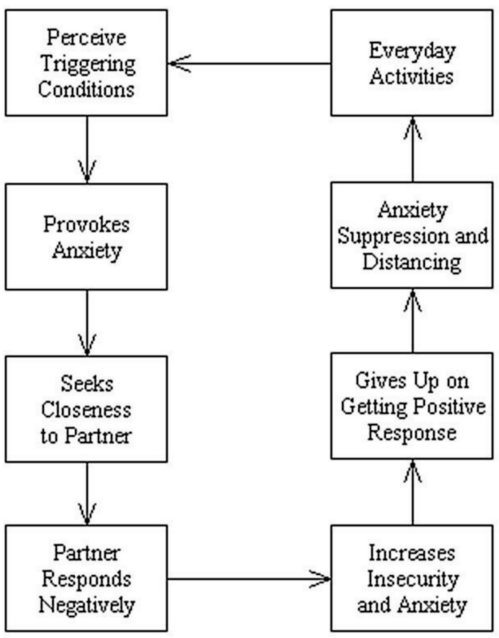
There are several pitfalls here, but one is that you tell an anxious-preoccupied person about attachment styles so they say "ok, I will inhibit my anxious behaviors so they will like me". This will likely fail because it comes from the same frame of desperately needing to be liked.



Secure Attachment Pattern



Anxious pattern



Attachment-Avoidance pattern

Images from How to Love (or Leave) a Dismissive Partner

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Power Differences

Power dynamics between people in EA [excerpts]

It's harder for junior people to give their real opinion

Opinions that junior people express will often be shaped (maybe unintentionally and unknowingly) by what they perceive senior people's opinions to be or what they think the senior people want to hear.

Possible steps:

- Ask junior people to share thoughts before you give yours. Listen openly and show

interest.

- Give them more time and encouragement to lay out messy thoughts.
- Set the stage for welcoming messy / unformed thoughts by sharing some of your own.
- Give encouragement and appreciation when they offer opinions and especially when they disagree with you - make it a good experience for them.
- Point to any tangible changes made based on critical feedback, so people can see you take it seriously.

It's harder for junior people to establish boundaries

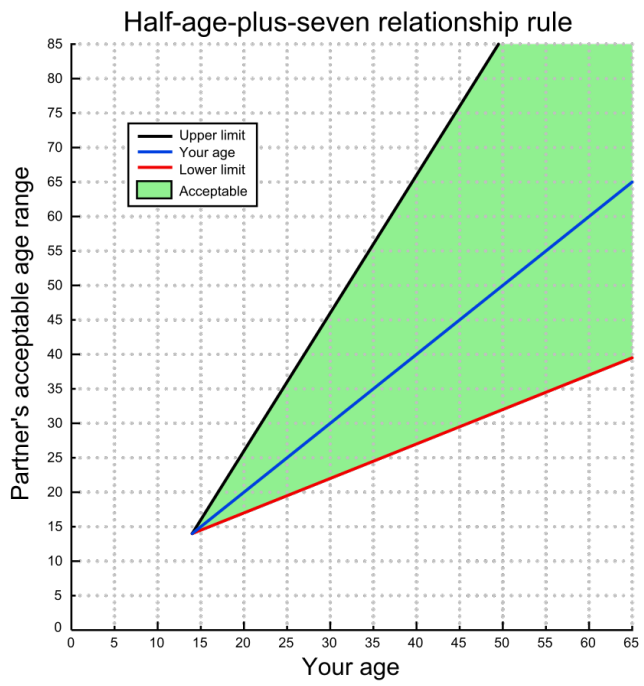
A senior EA I know notes that she's effusive with hugs at work. She realized after a long time that one of the junior staff she was working with prefers less physical contact than most people, and that she was probably making this person uncomfortable by offering hugs that they didn't feel comfortable turning down.

Social situations are also assessments

When junior people are in the same space with senior people, they often correctly feel that they're being evaluated as potential future grantees or hires. Every lunch feels a bit like a job interview. The good aspect of this is that they would probably like to have a foot in the door, but the bad aspect is that it can make time in EA spaces pretty anxious because even minor social interactions feel high-stakes.

Age Differences

Half your age plus seven - common wisdom



Thoughts on dating younger people

Regarding dating younger people, I think there are some things which bump up the usual risk of relationships being rough, maybe by like 2x or 3x (so if you have a 3% chance of it being Quite Bad and a 12% chance of it being Normal Bad, you pop up to maybe 9% and 36%, respectively).

Like, I think that the only things that make it bad are the things that make *any* relationship bad: abuse of power differentials, coercion or mind-bending/gaslighting, selfishness of various kinds, failure to communicate, etc.

I think the most important things to track:

1. Try to note if there are Big Traumas or triggers in either of you; the main thing that sent me and one partner in the wrong direction was me not finding out in the early and mid days the sheer extent of her abusive upbringing.

2. Know the difference between your own coferences[1] and your own preferences, like which things you Really Want versus which things you Kinda Want But Only If She Wants Them, and vice versa. Like, things get askew when asks are not really "just asks" or whatever; having clear selfsight there goes a long way.

Standard don't-be-level-one-stupid advice on age gaps is, imo, level two stupid. The standard advice is, like, the older or more powerful person should be the "bigger" person, and be more willing to sacrifice and so forth. To take their own needs as object, create more space for the younger person. And this is absolutely true, but as a *side effect.* If you *target* that, you fall prey to a weird Goodharting thing where you're always the "grownup" in the room and you're not allowed to want things for fear of creating pressure, etc.

I think the don't-be-level-two-stupid thing is know your own wants, needs, and desires. Know their relative strengths, and how eagerly/pressured-ly you are motivated by them. Be clear about what you want (not necessarily all right up front/first date, but reasonably early on) and seek the overlap. Be able to see where you can get A, B, and D from this partner, but not C or E, and then be smart about that. Like either get C and E elsewhere, or genuinely make peace about it, or whatever. Avoid fabricated options.

Put another way: I think people should be, and are, motivated *both* by wanting genuinely good things for their partner, *and* by wanting genuinely good things for themselves. Where people run into trouble is where they can't tell the difference between these two buckets. They talk themselves into "this thing I really want just for my own sake is *good* for them" instead of, y'know, asking or checking, and believing the info that comes back. With age gaps or power differentials, it's easy to accidentally overwhelm the less-experienced partner, if you're not watching yourself for that. (So I claim.)

Thoughts on age gap relationships

Things that give me a baseline skepticism of age gap relationships including some examples of things going wrong:

- very different social / financial stability-power, which leads to the younger person making more compromises or feeling more insecure
- being at different life stages, and the younger person missing important opportunities or feeling pressured to do things they're not quite ready for due to trying to sync with the older person's needs (but I think this doesn't apply as much for non-primary relationships)
- **younger person has less relationship experience and doesn't realize what things are negotiable/normal, leading to them advocating less for their needs/wants than you'd expect**
    - "what things are negotiable / normal" = concrete example from my life, not of bad behaviour, but it was like 4ish years into my sex life before a partner was like "hey, uh, you can say 'no' to sex whenever and I'll still like you" and I apparently really needed to hear that spelled out explicitly?? similarly, I did some dubious-consent stuff with a partner before realizing that just because someone is a dude does not mean they are always DTF in whatever configuration and you should also check in... I feel like it would just be super easy to miss stuff like this if you've been dating people with more relationship experience for a while? but also this shows up in, like, "when is it okay to talk about jealousy" or "how often are you supposed to see a partner". I was talking with a partner about this (in a general pattern way) and he used the metaphor of how travelling to a new country is supposed to open your eyes to all these ways you assumed things were simply done, but actually that was just your culture, what! I feel like the same sort of learning can apply to having multiple relationships?
- (this is my age gap failure mode that sucked) **older person assumes that the younger person is implementing a certain relationship interface** (e.g. "we had a talk where you said you were okay with us not being committed, so I'm assuming this is fine"), doesn't check in enough that the underlying assumptions are true and is careless/hurtful as a result (there's a difficult balance here where you want to respect the younger person's agency but also need to be extra careful)
    - I had one relationship where I was like "cool, we had a really explicit expectations-setting conversation, she said she was fine with this arrangement, so she probably is" when in fact the situation was more like "she is accepting a on-net-bad-for-her relationship because she doesn't feel like she can negotiate for anything else" and I think that if I had been more carefully modelling her as less relationship-experienced I would not have been so casual about "cool we set up this relationship check-in where she could bring stuff up and she didn't, therefore all is chill"
- **younger person overweights older person's opinions / mixing mentorship and romance, leading to them signing onto things they otherwise wouldn't**
    - I know someone who dropped out of school to do a coding bootcamp on an older partner's recommendation, and this was not a good idea in the end, and maybe they would have given it more independent thought / trusted the

maybe they would have given it more independent thought / trusted the suggestion less if their partner hadn't been older? hard to know, tho

- **precocious young person really wants to be taken seriously as an adult, overrides their own boundaries in order to appear more mature** by what they perceive their partner's definition of that to be (I've seen this lead to two cases of quite severe abuse)

some things I think you can do here:

- precommit to helping them break up with you if need be (my first girlfriend, 18 to my 16, talked me through breaking up with her; one of my partners talked a younger partner through breaking up with him)
- since they don't know about the heterogeneity of relationship culture, spend more time asking questions along the lines of "hey, just so you know, it's okay if you [----]?" or "just to check, would you rather [-----]? I want to make sure we don't just fall into [.....] because that's how I often do things"

Inexperienced people can pick up bad habits from dating other inexperienced people

There's another risk that a person who's been dating romantically **inexperienced/unskilled people (e.g. likely other young people) might have picked up some bad habits.** For example, a good habit is that when you're unhappy/want to say no/change your mind/etc, you say this explicitly and proactively; however, if your past partners have responded poorly when you've done that, you'll acquire the habit of not actively expressing anything that might get a negative reaction.

If you're unhappy in your relationship

If your relationship makes you unhappy, do something. The unhappiness is a sign that something should change.

I was once in a relationship where I was extremely attached to the person, though I was miserable due to some bad dynamics we had going on. The thought of ending it was unbearable, but I was also really unhappy. I kept thinking to myself "If I'm so rational, why do I feel so trapped in this bad situation?" Eventually, I got myself out of it, but I'd like to think that I won't get myself into it ever again. I hope I've learned to really sit up and act when I'm that unhappy.

Abusive Relationships

Please help fill this section out!

Please help flll this section out!

It's not normal to be harmed

A classic and maybe even defining feature of abuse is that the abused person is made to feel that it is normal or even right for them to be harmed. They're told "You deserve it." Or "this is just what relationships or families are like." Or "you aren't being harmed, you're fine." Over time, abused people may come to believe this.

Don't let the fear of leaving trap you

I don't personally have direct experience of abusive relationships but I think I've observed a few things a distance: **people end up trapped in abusive relationships because even though they're unhappy, the thought of leaving feels worse.** And that's how you end up trapped. I think the escape is realizing that while leaving will be painful, it's survivable and is for the best.

The other thing I've observed is people staying in relationships they don't like out of fear of angering their partner. I don't know how to solve that, but I just want to say **"don't let their anger control you!"** You deserve better.

It's likely a very large red flag if either you feel embarrassed to describe your relationship to others or if your partner would get mad at you doing so.

Privacy norms can be wielded as an obfuscating weapon◦

Sometimes, privacy is wielded as a tool to enable manipulation.

I've run into a couple people who exploited my good faith / willingness to keep things confidential, as part of an overall manipulative pattern. Unfortunately, I don't feel comfortable going too far into the details here (please don't speculate in the comments), which makes it a bit harder to sanity check.

Resources

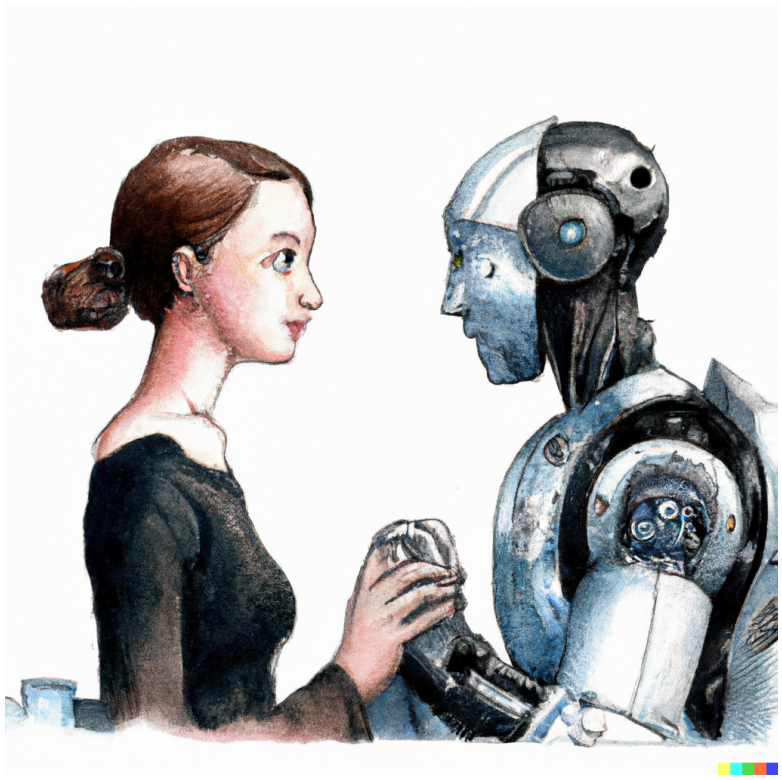
Probably organize this section better if it grows to have more stuff. Anyone feel free to sort as they feel fit.

- LessWrong Relationships tag◦

- LessWrong Communication Cultures tag°
- Reciprocity.io
  - Rationalist/EA dating site where you mark interest in people and two people are only notified if they both expressed interest
- Avoidant: How to Love (or Leave) A Dismissive Avoidant Partner [book]
  - Generally helpful book on the topic of Attachment Styles. Useful for understanding that different people have learnt (or deeply ingrained) different patterns of behavior in relationship and that the interaction of these patterns matters.
- The Mastery of Love: A Practical Guide to the Art of Relationship [book]
  - This is a crazy book. But has some great stuff on letting your partner be who they are recognizing that you're not responsible for solving all your partner's problems.
- How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk [book]
  - A surprisingly helpful book for adult-to-adult communication
  - Mo Nastri°: I also enjoyed weft's Book Review: How To Talk So Little Kids Will Listen°, written by Julie King and Joanne Faber, daughter of Adele Faber, who co-wrote the former with Elaine Mazlich. Quoting weft:
    - The core principles are the same, but the update stands on its own. Where the original "Kids" acts more like a workbook, asking the reader to self-generate responses, "Little Kids" feels more like it's trying to download a response system into your head via modeling and story-telling. I personally prefer this system better, because the workbook approach feels like it's only getting to my System 2 (sorry for the colloquialism). Meanwhile being surrounded with examples and stories works better for me to fully integrate a new mode of interaction.
  - I too prefer examples and stories to self-generated responses, so I thought it'd be a useful complement to others like weft and I.
- Elizabeth: I found Crucial Conversations to be the adult version of How To Talk So... and it seriously levelled up my interpersonal skills at the time.
- Mark Manson Relationship Advice
  - Came up on a first Google search, pretty reasonable stuff
- 20 People on the Best Relationship Advice They Ever Received
  - Another Google result that seems pretty reasonable
- That's Not What I Meant! How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships [book]
  - Haven't read it but maybe good?
- Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Love [book]
  - Read it five years ago and don't really remember it. Focuses on chemical/evolution aspects and makes interesting comparisons of love to addiction. Maybe of interest to the especially limerent
- Captain Awkward Dating Guide for Geeks

- The Ferrett – blog with a lot of great, thoughtful posts about poly and relationships
- Reddit: Am I the asshole?
    - People post about conflicts and get the crowd's opinion of who is being unreasonable
- Models of human relationships - tools to understand people [review post]°
    - Summary/review of a long list of relationship books
- Morpheus°: I'd add the pragmatist guide to relationships (has material on seeking as well as on maintaining relationships) I read like half the book (the parts remotely relevant to me (the book has ~660 pages)) and is very much written from a more selfish livehacking/"munchkinism"/economist (markets and contracts) kind of perspective, which I found entertaining, but which might be off-putting for some. The authors also know and seem to practice their Bayesian epistemology, and the book held up pretty well to online spot checks, and asking people. I still felt like sometimes the authors didn't add enough uncertainty disclaimers around their theories about humans, but it's not like I wouldn't have similar complaints about some lw posts. and
- Plays Well with Others: The Surprising Science Behind Why Everything You Know About Relationships Is (Mostly) Wrong
- Books I read 2017 - Part 1. Relationships, Learning [review post]°
    - same author as last one, mostly the same books too
    - *post contains brief reviews/descriptions of each book*
    - **Relationships & Communication**
        1. Having Difficult Conversations - Douglass Stone
        2. Crucial Confrontations -Kerry Patterson
        3. Emotional Intelligence - Daniel Goleman
        4. reread: How to Win Friends and Influence People, circa 2007 - Dale Carnegie
        5. More Than Two - Franklin Veaux
        6. Nonviolent Communication - Marshall Rosenberg
        7. Living Non-Violent Communication - Marshall Rosenberg
        8. Daring Greatly - Brene brown
        9. On Apology - Aaron Lazare
        10. Circling Handbook - Marc Beneteau
        11. 7 Principles for Making Marriage Work - John Gottman
        12. Feeling Good Together - David D Burns
        13. Getting Past The Pain Between Us - Marshall Rosenberg
        14. Graduating From Guilt - Holly Michelle Eckert
        15. The Surprising Purpose of Anger - Marshall Rosenberg
        16. Come as You Are - Emily Nagoski
        17. Jono Bacon - The Art of the Community
        18. Games People Play

19. The Stories we tell Ourselves
20. ~~Sex at Dawn~~
    a. Elizabeth: Sex at Dawn is also atrocious from a scientific perspective, although much less likely to cause overt harm [than More than Two].



1. ^ Coference is a preference that is referenced on someone else's preference, e.g. "I have a preference for your preference or something that's the combination of our first-order individual preferences.

Mentioned in

18 Notes on Love

35 comments, sorted by top scoring

[-] **David Hornbein** 4y ▼ 26 ▲ ✕ 9 ✓

Registering that I much prefer the format of the older repositories you link to, where additions are left as comments that can be voted on, over the format here, where everything is in a giant list sorted by topic rather than ranking. For any crowdsourced repository, most suggestions will be mediocre or half-baked, but with voting and sorting it's easy to read only the ones that rise to the top. I'd also be curious to check out the highest-voted suggestions on this topic, but not curious enough to wade through an unranked list of (I assume) mostly mediocre and half-baked ideas to find them.

[-] **Ruby** 4y ▼ 4 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

Yeah, that might have been the correct choice, though I consider this a not-yet-concluded experiment. It was an intentional choice to see how using a publicly editable document as built-in distillation goes.

In fact the document is not fully publicly editable, it still requires an admin to approve changes, so you should assume that everything in there is something that someone with modestly good judgment thought was worth including.

My first preference would actually to have made this a wiki page with all the that functionality that has (clear contributions that can be voted on), however our current wiki tech doesn't handle concurrent editing and I was worried about that. Might have been fine though.

[-] **Raemon** 4y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 5 ✓

I'm interested in seeing an experiment using the wiki-option, esp. since that includes the ability to vote on contributions. I suspect the lack of concurrency isn't going to be that big a deal. (Wikipedia does it somehow and I don't think they have google-docs functionality)

[-] **Ruby** 4y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Wikipedia has some kind of merge conflict tool that we don't for wiki, but yeah, thinking about it now I think it probably would have been fine.

[-] **Gunnar_Zarncke** 4y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

It would make more sense to write a summary article of the top voted advice after the voting. The way it is right now discourages adding advice - because there is so much in the OP and instead leads to meta comments like this.

[-] **Elizabeth** 4y* ▼ 19 ▲ ✕ 3 ✓

I would strongly recommend removing More Than Two from the post. The primary author has been accused of abuse by his co-author and multiple other long term partners (>50% of all long term partners he's had, maybe close to 100%). It's not clear to me his behavior meets a strict definition of abuse, but you can't get to this stage without some combination of "the relationships were terrible and he contributed to that" and "he has absolutely terrible taste in partners", and I think both are pretty disqualifying for a relationship advice guru. Plus, while I don't have any evidence other than his statements and theirs, the kinds of bad behavior they describe are extremely consistent with the failure modes of what he writes about.

Sex at Dawn is also atrocious from a scientific perspective, although much less likely to cause overt harm.

[-] **Ruby** 4y ▼ 6 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

I included these comments in the post so people actively know these resources are disendorsed.

[-] **Wes F** 4y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ -1 ✓

I disagree with this comment. Veaux seems awful, but a bad messenger doesn't make a bad message and his coauthor (one of his ex-partners and accusers) AFAICT, still endorses the book. In any case, I continue to

believe it contains good relationship advice.

[-] **Elizabeth** 4y 5 0

Can you say more about what you think is good about the advice, and why that book in particular is the best source of that advice?

The co-author didn't immediately retract the book but had since said at least one of the core models strips people of defenses against abuse, and that that wasn't necessarily the worst thing in the book, just the easiest thing to point to.

https://www.google.com/amp/s/brighterthansunflowers.com/2019/11/29/what-i-got-wrong-in-more-than-two-the-dark-night-of-the-soul/amp/

[-] **Bezzi** 4y 16 0

I would like to express serious disappointment about astrological compatibility being labeled as "worth checking" on LW. The only possible way in which I could see this having any effect is the scenario where your partner believes so much in astrology to turn the incompatibility belief into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

[-] **Ben Pace** 4y 15 0

That has to be there as a test of whether anyone actually read the post. The cite is "Oprah Daily".

[-] **habryka** 4y 24 1

I do think the joke would be funnier if the link went to a Rick Roll. I will make the change.

[-] **vals tutor** 4y 1 0

Though I expected it to be a joke, I'm still happy that the first comment on this (good btw) post is a call out on the astrology section. I did not bother to click the link because I did not imagine I could find anything of value behind it so I don't get the occasion to confirm it was a joke until arriving to this comment.

[-] **Ruby** 4y 7 0

I regrettably removed the Zodiac section since someone pointed out that since the post is publicly editable, their first thought is that it was vandalism.

[-] **Duncan Sabien (Inactive)** 4y* 13 -3

EDIT: The below is somewhat offhand/only partially endorsed, and I added this disclaimer about that after mingyuan's good pushback below.

Having done the battery of questions labeled "infohazard" with my partner Logan: I claim they are an infohazard if and only if your relationship is Bad and you prioritize Not Discovering This Fact.

Like, they are infohazardous ONLY to people in bad relationships who wish not to know this truth.

Which, I think, is not quite what "infohazard" means.

[-] [anonymous] 4y* 18 7

[comment deleted]

[-] **Duncan Sabien (Inactive)** 4y 4 3

General agreement with what you're saying here.

I think that there's a pretty important thing about "early in a relationship" ... like, it is in fact the case that a

tree can handle more weight than a sapling, and a sapling can handle more weight than a three-inch sprout, and it would be bad and wrong to say that there was something *wrong* with the three-inch sprout or the sapling just because it hadn't had time to grow and strengthen into a tree yet.

To give a cheap and easy example, many people convert *away* from homophobia because they learn that someone they know personally and feel positively toward was quietly gay all along. Presumably, that update would have been impossible if the person had led with "btw I'm gay" and thus the relationship never became rich enough to cause the questioning of other assumptions.

That being said, though, I think there's something actually Important about that list of questions, and similar lists like it.

I think you're right to locate some fraction of the, uh, I'm going to call it "problem" even though some people would disagree, in the *individual,* as opposed to in the relationship itself. Like, you point out that some fraction of why-these-questions-could-be-destructive lies in people's relationships to truth, and their ability to handle scary and confusing stuff. That seems correct, to me.

But I think that, even as I endorse pushback against my offhand comment above, I *do* stand fairly firmly behind "if you and your partner have had what seems like a good relationship for 6-12 mo+, and this list of questions would cause you problems, that's strong evidence of a *real problem* somewhere, whether it be in you, or your partner, or the line between you."

Like, I do in fact believe that there is some quality of Goodness (good, healthy relationship between good, healthy people) that smoothly-navigating-these-questions points at, and that an inability to smoothly navigate these questions points to a meaningful lack of a goodness property that is real and important.

I don't think there exist relationships that I would agree are Okay, between people I agree are Okay, that are *not* able to take those questions in stride. If [questions are damaging], then [*something* was already genuinely wrong]. It's not that the questions themselves are harmful, it's that they expose something that's already very much there.

(Which I have Gendlin-esque attitudes about.)

[-] **Lukas_Gloor** 4y 7 2

How attached are you to the wording "take those questions in stride"? Because in order to fully agree with your comment, I'd want to replace it with something more like "make it through these questions without lastingly diminishing the strength of the relationship." The re-wording would allow for outcomes like "one person or more feel terrible for having had an insecurity triggered, even though it doesn't imply anything bad about relationship compatibility."

Basically, I feel like there are two types of issues-that-cause-bad-feelings that can be unearthed via these questions:

- Noticing you're significantly less compatible than you thought
- Triggering insecurities

I agree that there's something wrong/sad about shrugging away from things around the first bullet point.

On the second bullet point, I'd say the nature of triggers/insecurities is precisely that they can give you a bad day e*ven when there's no rational reason to worry*. Some of the phrasings you use ("in stride", "navigate smoothly" – **edit:** though not all of them, because you also say "if these questions would cause you problems" at one point, and that seems like an appropriately strong wording to me!) suggests that you think finding the exercise emotionally very difficult means that there's automatically something suboptimal with the relationship. I don't agree that this follows. I concede that there's a point above which too many or too strong insecurities will predictably impair the nature of a relationship. However, I think that point only comes significantly above "have zero triggers/insecurities." The important part is to keep triggers/insecurities below the threshold where it incentivizes even the most considerate and trusted people in your life to white-lie to you or hide things from you to avoid causing you too much harm. I think the list of questions goes well past that level because it's adversarially optimized to find people's triggers. You don't need that level of bullet-proofness to "live in truth" in a relationship.

This gets me to a bit of a tangential rant, but I think it's a virtue-signalling-related failure mode among rationalists that there sometimes develop these pseudo-virtues in the vicinity of things that are truly

important (like "living in truth") where people push the truly important thing to outlandish extremes and thereby pass implicit judgment on others who don't go to these extremes, implying that they're less good rationalists. "Living in truth" is an important virtue, but it has very little to do with "you're doing something wrong as a rationalist if you have significant triggers/insecurities." (I'm not saying that you were claiming that in your post (see also my **edit** above!), or that your comment is evidence that you think that way, but based on my overall impression from reading your posts/comments, it wouldn't surprise me if part of you thought something like that, perhaps in an unreflected fashion.) All else equal, it's better not to have triggers/insecurities, yes. But people differ tremendously around dimensions like neuroticsm, and there are tons of other rationality-related skills one can practice, and then there's a whole part of *actually doing work that reduces suffering* (or work that advances someone's self-oriented goals in-real-life, if we're talking about non-effective-altruist rationalists) instead of this perpetually-inward-focused work on "improving one's rationality."

[-] **Duncan Sabien (Inactive)** 4y 4 0

No objection to people having short-term dips into negative feelings/reactions which they then successfully work through either alone or with their partner or with some outside help.

[-] **Kaj_Sotala** 4y 4 4

> But I think that, even as I endorse pushback against my offhand comment above, I do stand fairly firmly behind "if you and your partner have had what seems like a good relationship for 6-12 mo+, and this list of questions would cause you problems, that's strong evidence of a real problem somewhere, whether it be in you, or your partner, or the line between you."

I suspect that this is both true, and also that for many if not most people, the best way of dealing with that problem is simply to avoid it.

[-] **Elizabeth** 4y 12 1

I think on average people should be more willing than they are to make big investments in relationships (couples therapy to learn how to fight, fly out to meet someone perfect but far away...) and less willing to endure small things that are never ever going to be fixed (they're always late but you can plan around it, they can't stand up to their mom but you don't have to see her that often). The big investments sometimes pay off enormously, and the objectively best relationship for you probably contains a few. And if they don't work, you'll know and act on it. Whereas the small annoyances keep racking up costs, often getting slowly worse but never bad enough to generate the activation energy to fix it or leave. And either you're frogboiled indefinitely, or something (illness, job stress, child) takes enough slack leaves the system that you freak out about something that has objectively been true the entire time, right when there is the least capacity to deal with it.

[Reverse all advice, etc. Maybe the main post should link to reverse all advice as well?]

[-] **ClipMonger** 4y 7 0

I think it should be easier to share really good advice on LW, period, without needing a really strong justification other than it helps people out with things that will clearly hold them back otherwise.

[-] **Yonatan Cale** 4y 7 0

+1 for the Abusive Relationships section.

I think there's a lot of expected value in a project that raises awareness to "these are good reason to break up" and/or "here are common-but-very-bad reasons to stay in an abusive relationship", perhaps with support for people who choose to break up. It's a project I sometimes think of opening but I'm not sure where I'd start

[-] **harsimony** 4y 5 0

Great idea, thanks for posting this!

I wrote a post on how to have productive disagreements with loved ones:

https://harsimony.wordpress.com/2022/06/21/winning-arguments-with-loved-ones/

Here is the subsection on analyzing disagreements:

> Because arguments are emotional, it can be helpful to try to dispassionately assess the situation with your partner and get to the root of the problem.
>
> The first step is to break the disagreement down into isolated chunks. Identify the handful of differences you are having, and deal with them as independently as possible. If you notice discussion of one problem bleeding into another, try to refocus on the subject at hand.
>
> For each problem, try to set aside your ego and emotions; what's the real issue? Ask fair questions of your partner and hear them out. At the end of your discussion, you should be able to articulate your partner's point in a way they would find satisfactory. A surprising number of arguments can be resolved simply by giving both partners a fair hearing.
>
> It can be helpful to try to come up with neutral examples related to your problem. Flip the roles that you and your partner play in the example and be honest about how it would change things. It also can be helpful to consider things from a third-person perspective [4].
>
> At the end of all of this, you should come to an agreement about the things you will do differently in the future. Once again, it doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be something you can build upon.

[-] **MNoetel** 4y 3 0

Really appreciate you pulling this together Ruby. Amazing work.
Two resources I've found useful or interesting that weren't on the above list:

1. Emotion-focused therapy has *huge* effect sizes for increasing martial satisfaction (suspiciously huge). Even if you account for publication/other biases I'd still wager it's one of the best rehabilitate and preventative interventions for couples (but it basically just pools lots of what you've discussed, like turning toward hard conversations and non-violent communication). This is the best book summarising it: https://www.amazon.com.au/Hold-Me-Tight-Conversations-Lifetime/dp/1491513810
2. My PhD student did a systematic review of randomised experiments to help people make relationship decisions (e.g., stay or go? if that link is still being minted, see here). Basically, there's nothing, except for helping decide whether to leave an abusive partner. But, the one study on non-abusive couples was interesting: if you flip a coin and do what the coin says, you're much more likely to be happy six months later. The most obvious explanation here is status quo bias: people are afraid of leaving but are happier once they do. If you're thinking hard about leaving, such that you'd be willing to do what a coin says, then probably just go. If you're not quite ready, I found the idea of setting tripwires (see Ch.11 summary here) helpful to make it clear what I want to see change without constantly shifting the goalposts on myself (e.g., if x doesn't happen in 3 months, I'm out).

[-] **Ruby** 4y 3 0

Thanks! Added!

[-] **Mo Putera** 4y 3 0

The 'Resources' section lists How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk [book] -- I also enjoyed weft's Book Review: How To Talk So Little Kids Will Listen°, written by Julie King and Joanne Faber, daughter of Adele Faber, who co-wrote the former with Elaine Mazlich. Quoting weft:

> The core principles are the same, but the update stands on its own. Where the original "Kids" acts more like a workbook, asking the reader to self-generate responses, "Little Kids" feels more like it's trying to download a response system into your head via modeling and story-telling. I personally prefer this system better, because the workbook approach feels like it's only getting to my System 2 (sorry for the colloquialism). Meanwhile being surrounded with examples and stories works better for me to fully integrate a new mode of interaction

> integrate a new mode of interaction.

I too prefer examples and stories to self-generated responses, so I thought it'd be a useful complement to others like weft and I.

[-] **Ruby** 4y 2 0

Added!

[-] **Elizabeth** 4y* 2 0

I found Crucial Conversations to be the adult version of How To Talk So... and it seriously levelled up my interpersonal skills at the time.

[-] **Ruby** 4y 2 0

Added!

[-] **Morpheus** 4y 3 0

I'd add the pragmatist guide to relationships (has material on seeking as well as on maintaining relationships) I read like half the book (the parts remotely relevant to me (the book has ~660 pages)) and is very much written from a more selfish livehacking/"munchkinism"/economist (markets and contracts) kind of perspective, which I found entertaining, but which might be off-putting for some. The authors also know and seem to practice their Bayesian epistemology, and the book held up pretty well to online spot checks, and asking people. I still felt like sometimes the authors didn't add enough uncertainty disclaimers around their theories about humans, but it's not like I wouldn't have similar complaints about some lw posts. and

[-] **Ruby** 4y 2 0

Added!

[-] **Richard_Ngo** 4y 3 0

I've edited via the link you gave, but it doesn't seem to be showing up in the main post.

(Specifically, I edited the first dating doc link, which was broken.)

[-] **Ruby** 4y 2 -1

Looks like I had to press "Publish Changes" for it to go live, which is probably only a button that I see.

[-] **Ruby** 4y 2 0

I've added Plays Well with Others: The Surprising Science Behind Why Everything You Know About Relationships Is (Mostly) Wrong based on CarolJ's recommendation on the EA Forum crosspost.

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