

Love Smarter, Not Harder: 3 Love & Life Hacks to Improve Every Relationship in Your Life!

When asked what we treasure most, people readily respond with one word—relationships. Our friends, families, and romantic partners enrich our lives in a myriad of ways, providing encouragement, support, affection, and joy.

Except when they don't.

When our relationships are in crisis, our life is in crisis and when they're thriving, we thrive. As Tony Robbins puts it, "The quality of your life is the quality of your relationships."



why is it such a struggle to maintain healthy and meaningful intimacy in our lives?

Well for one, relationships don't come with an owner's manual—we have to rely on what we observe.

As we grow up, we watch the adults around us and unwittingly absorb their patterns and tendencies. We assume everyone behaves as they do because we have nothing else to compare it to.

Naturally, some of us had exemplary models and others of us well, not so much. But regardless, most of us could use a little help.

So in efforts to cultivate and sustain healthy relationships, let's examine three key practices to strengthen our most important connections—friendships, family relationships, and significant others. We'll provide a "hack" for each—a principle that's easy to remember and guaranteed to improve your relationship in a profound way!

Let's start with our friendships.

— DR. KARIN —
LOVE & LIFE
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Relationship Hack for Friendships—Examine Your Expectations

We're going to be best friends forever! No matter what happens, we'll stay close. You're my girl and nothing will change that!

We said it. We meant it. So what happened?

Life happened. Simple as that.

After college you moved to different parts of the country. She started grad school and you landed your dream job. Now she's studying for exams and conducting research while you're attending networking events and hoping for a promotion.

Or maybe she got married and you're still single. Or her second baby is due in March and you're considering IVF because after two years, the stork still hasn't showed up. You used to have everything in common, but not now.

Life happens, and it gets in the way of even the closest friendships. And it hurts—a lot.

But we *can* stay close. It is possible if we implement this relationship hack—examine our expectations.

Things change and friendships change. But change doesn't mean your bestie doesn't care about you anymore.

She cares about you and always will—just as you care about her—but at the moment, you have different priorities. Life has moved you in different directions, but you're still the same people.

clearly our besties make a difference!

So, as her BFF, the most loving thing you can do is adjust your expectations.

But how?

Recognize that just because she can't spend as much time with you, she still loves you. Cut her some slack when she can't make it to Girls Night Out because she's chasing after a toddler and her husband is away on business.

Recognize that she needs to focus on other pursuits—her career, relationship, or children—but she still loves you. Don't guilt trip her for missing your annual Christmas shopping excursion because her in-laws are in town.

Recognize that more than likely, your lives will eventually come together again—you'll be in the same stage and your priorities will align once more. Don't bad-mouth her to the rest of your squad, complaining about how much she's disappointed you and you can't believe your friendship ended up this way. Because remember, she still loves you and your friendship hasn't ended. Once you get through this season, you'll be close again.

Until then, give her a little grace and adjust your expectations.

Psychologists who study social support find that female friendships possess unique qualities, distinct from other relationships in our lives. In fact, our BFFs not only contribute to our emotional health, but to our physical health as well!

Studies show that loneliness is related to high blood pressure, so our connections to our besties actually keep us physiologically balanced. Another study found that when placed in stressful situations, holding a friend's hand reduces the neurological signs of stress.

Our squad can even help us fight cancer! A 2013 study in *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment* found that women with 10 close girlfriends were four times less likely to die than women who reported having no friends.

Finally, a meta-analysis of 148 studies concluded that those with close friends live longer. In fact, social isolation is considered as risky to our health as smoking, alcoholism, and obesity!

Hawkley, L. C., Thisted, R. A., Masi, C. M., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness predicts increased blood pressure: 5-year cross-lagged analyses in middle-aged and older adults. *Psychology and Aging*, 25(1), 132-141.

Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T., & Layton, B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *J.PLoS Med* 7 (7).

Kroenke, C., Quesenberry, C., Kwan, M., Sweeney, C., Castillo, A., & Caan, B. (2013). Social networks, social support, and burden in relationships, and mortality after breast cancer diagnosis in the Life After Breast Cancer Epidemiology (LACE) Study. *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment*, 137 (1), 261-271.

Relationship Hack for Families—Examine Your Boundaries

Every family has unwritten rules and assumptions about how its members should relate to one another. Beliefs surrounding connectedness and separateness constitute what psychologists call *boundaries*. A family's boundaries determine the "rules" regarding closeness, frequency of contact, and conversation i.e. which topics are considered appropriate to discuss and which are off limits.

As we grow up, we learn the nuances of our particular family dynamics and consider them normal. But some dynamics—although they feel normal to family members—are not at all healthy.

One of the most common and least healthy dynamics is *enmeshment*. In enmeshed families, *closeness* is equated with *love*—the unwritten family rule is, "You must be close to me to show me you love me."

For example, in some families, adult children are expected to live near their parents. Those who move across country (or across town!) to pursue a fantastic job opportunity or because they've always dreamed of living in a particular city, are perceived as being unloving and betraying the family.

The family's requirement for proximity stifles the adult child's growth and development.

In other families, the expectation of closeness involves communication. Family members discuss *everything* and any unwillingness to share is perceived as distancing and rejection.

This obligation invades members' privacy and often negatively impacts their other adult relationships—especially with significant others and spouses—because the expectation is their primary allegiance will remain to their family of origin.

Finding a balance between remaining close to our family while also enjoying our adult independence is possible if we implement this relationship hack—examine our *boundaries*.

The reality is, you're an adult now and setting boundaries is healthy and mature and it's *not* a betrayal of your family.

Depending on the way your family functions, setting boundaries may be a relatively simple task or it may prove very difficult. Regardless, it's a wise step to take and everyone in the family will be better off for it—you're actually doing your entire family a favor. (For more information, see the Triangulation sidebar.)

Recognize that you'll feel awkward (and maybe even guilty) when first establishing boundaries. But of course, so often the uncomfortable things we do, are the right things to do.

Recognize that we can love our families dearly and still maintain a private life. And in fact, once we're married, our primary obligation is to the family we've created. So, if we're allowing our parents, siblings, or in-laws to pull us away from our spouse and children, we're violating our marital vows.

Recognize that by establishing boundaries, you're actually giving your family members a gift! You're letting them know you're capable of managing your own life. They can go back to managing theirs! With boundaries in place, you're free to interact on an adult/adult level and family members become true friends. You enjoy each other's company because you *want* to spend time together, as opposed to feeling obligated—just because you're family.



Every family has unwritten rules and assumptions about how its members should relate to one another.

Another great way to establish boundaries within family relationships is to refuse to engage in *triangulation*. Triangulation is the tendency for family members to involve a third party in dynamics that actually pertain to two members.

It's very common and very unhealthy.

To provide an example of triangulation, consider the following. Let's say Mom begins to confide in her adult daughter, Stacey, about her frustrations with her marriage. Since Stacey is 28, Mom has begun to view her as both daughter and friend (which is okay) and now wants to share intimate details of her marriage to Stacey's father (which is not okay.)

Why isn't this okay? Because it's a violation of several family boundaries and it places Stacey in an awkward and potentially destructive position.

Stacey's relationship with her father is now tainted by the information her mother has disclosed. This might impact not only Stacey's perception of her dad, but it could also affect the way she views the men she dates or men in general. Her parents' marriage is not something she can possibly fix, nor is it, frankly, her problem.

To bring back a healthy dynamic to this scenario, Stacey needs to exit the triangulation—STAT! The next time Mom calls to gripe about Stacey's dad, Stacey should politely say, "Mom, I love you and I'm so sorry you're having problems with Dad. I always want to support you whenever I can, but when it comes to your marriage, I can't be helpful because it's just not my place. My job is to cultivate a healthy relationship as an adult-daughter to both my mother *and* my father. Hearing your dissatisfaction with the way Dad treats you affects my perception of him and that's not healthy for me. I hope you can understand."

Stacey will likely feel some guilt—which is misplaced, but she may feel it nonetheless—and Mom will likely push back with, "But honey, who can I talk to about this stuff? No one else knows Dad like you do!"

Stacey will need to stand firm and suggest her mother talk to her friends or to a counselor. It's not easy, but it's possible and doing so elevates the family's emotional health. Because really, Mom and Dad need to talk this out. If Stacey extricates herself from the conversation, there's a stronger chance her mother will take her concerns to the one person who can actually do something about it—her husband.

In some families, almost every conversation involves triangulation to some degree. Efforts to de-triangulate beg the question, What will we talk about if we don't talk about each other?

The answer is—anything! Talk about virtually anything—the weather, the last movie you saw, the Real Housewives of New York—anything is fair game, except conversations about each other!

Relationship Hack for Significant Others—Examine Yourself!

Robert Holden, Ph.D. sums it up succinctly, “Your relationship with yourself sets the tone for every other relationship in your life.”

It may seem counterintuitive, but the most effective approach to improving your relationship with your significant other is to focus on *yourself*.

Why? Because if we fail to take care of our own emotional well-being, we begin to look to our partner for fulfillment—which is, when you think about it, pretty unfair and unloving.

Happiness is an inside job.

When we look to our partner to make us happy, we approach the relationship from a position of need i.e. “I need you to be happy.” We not only place an unrealistic burden on our partner—because no one can make anyone else happy—we also hand over the power. Sociologists speak of *The Law of Least Interest: whoever is least interested in maintaining a relationship has the most power*. If we need our partner for fulfillment and contentment, we’re less likely to leave—even when we should. We’ll stay, because we’re needy.

Conversely, if we take care of our own emotional needs and create our own happiness, we approach our relationship from a position of desire i.e. “I’m happy on my own but I want to be with you.” You and your partner walk hand in hand, as two independent, fulfilled individuals who choose to do life together.

Our romantic relationships thrive when we implement this relationship hack—*examine ourselves*.

We can’t change anyone except ourselves. Our thoughts and behaviors are the *only* things we can actually control. But the beauty is, oftentimes when we change, others respond and make alterations as well.

So, the most loving thing you can do for your partner is to examine yourself.

Recognize that your partner loves and adores you, but cannot *make* you happy.

Recognize that it’s your job to work out any insecurities you experience in the relationship (through self-help books, therapy, relationship with God etc.) Or if you realize your partner truly is untrustworthy, well, then you’re with the wrong person and it’s time to leave!

Recognize that happily ever after starts with two happy people.

We all want meaningful, gratifying connections to others. Moreover, research substantiates the importance of healthy relationships for our overall well-being. Relationships are incredibly complex and nuanced, but we can learn to make sense of them by implementing the hacks listed above. When we examine our expectations, boundaries, and ourselves, we’ll witness profound improvements in relationships with friends, family, and partners!

Dr. Karin Anderson Abrell ❤️



But isn’t my partner/spouse supposed to make me happy? Isn’t that the whole point? And doesn’t the research on social support show that people with strong relationship networks function better in all realms of life?

Yes, our relationships contribute to our overall well-being but in terms of happiness, the data indicate we have a happiness baseline that remains fairly constant despite changes in relationship status.

In fact, a recent research project examined results from 18 longitudinal studies and found that levels of happiness do not vary before and after marriage. People remain as happy (or unhappy) as they’ve always been and even the “magic” of marriage does not affect this baseline.

Another result from this study revealed some discouraging news—our satisfaction with our spouse decreases after the wedding and this trajectory continues throughout the lifespan.

But there is a positive take-away! This research demonstrates that our happiness is ultimately *in our hands*! We can choose to get happy now! Whether single, married, divorced, or in-between, we’re in control of our happiness.

Luhmann, M., Hofmann, M., Eid, W., & Lucas, R. (2012). Subjective well-being and adaptation to life events: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 102 (3), 592-615.



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