



Building Relationships that Work

2 February 2026

Many clients, when discussing how they want to be, will tell me, “I want to see the good in everyone”. And usually that is when I raise my eyebrows and frown. I know what they mean and they are coming from a good place, however, you don’t want to just see the positive in people. You want to see everything. Yes, you can focus on or emphasise the good, but please, note the negative aspects also. I don’t believe in the perfect partner. That would mean there is a perfect person and there isn’t. We all do things and say things that can be irritating, annoying, and sometimes even hurtful. Everyone of us. Some more often than others. If you are looking at your relationships you want to see everything about the person. Go in with your eyes wide open. If you are thinking to yourself, “this is the perfect person for me and I will be blissfully happy from now on”, you are going to get a serious wake up call somewhere along the line. If you are thinking to yourself, “I love this about the person, and I can see that I will be irritated by such and such habits and behaviour, but I can live with this”, then you have a chance at making it work. If you can say to the person, “I love you, but this is how I think I may hurt you and how I think you could hurt me”, you have a really good chance of making it work.

For those of you who believe in soulmates – your soul is here to evolve. And to evolve and grow and become wise means you need to be challenged. Sometimes in unpleasant ways. Once again, if you think finding your soulmate means you will be forever happy, you are going to find that it is not so. You will have some hard work ahead of you. There are a number of psychology professionals, and I am one of them, who believe that a relationship is meant to help you become a better version of yourself. There are lots of ways to grow as a person – workshops, courses, therapy, coaching, counselling – which most of us acknowledge. Another way in which we come to learn about ourselves, our personalities, our neuroses, our blind spots, and our strengths, is through an open and honest relationship with someone who is capable of growing as well.

So, when you do go into a relationship with someone, make sure this person is well grounded in reality. You obviously need the attraction. Otherwise why would you even want to be with this person. You also want to have similar values. People can get on when they have different goals, but it is hard to be with someone who has different values to you. It is even hard to work for a company

that has different values to you. And the bigger the difference the worse the match. When deciding to be with someone you do want a very good understanding of the person and how they do life. You want to know the good aspects, and you also want to know what is not so good – what we sometimes call the weaknesses. And you want to know that you can live with the weaknesses, knowing that no one is perfect.

However, while you can love an imperfect person, and we do all have faults and blind spots and things we do that irritate others, there are some behaviours that quite literally destroy relationships. These are some of them.

Patterns that destroy relationships.

1. You are a wound collector. You make references to the past and wrong doings over and over again. You never want to let go. You keep bringing up how the person upset you and never get past it. You story fondle what this person did wrong.
2. You do things for your partner in the expectation that they must do things for you in return. In other words, you see a relationship as a game where scores need to be kept. You cannot have a relationship where one person gives and the other takes all the time. Or where everything you do is always what the other person wants. But to literally keep score of who does what and who owes who, is damaging. And if you keep score you are going to bring up the score all the time which puts everyone on edge.
3. You are constantly criticising and fault finding. There is a lot written about constructive criticism but I personally think rather don't do any criticism. In couples counselling there is a technique known as Behavioural Change Requests. That is, you focus on what you want rather than going over and over what upset you. An example of a behavioural change request would be, "It would mean a lot to me if you would....." "I would really like it if you would... This fits with my approach to focus on what you want, not what you don't want. I even teach clients behaviour change requests in a modified form for dealing with bosses and colleagues in the work environment. Ask for what you would like. Don't rant about what you don't like about the person or their actions. No one likes being criticised, and constant criticism breaks people down. If you are right about something and they were wrong, be gracious about it. You don't have to throw mistakes in the other person's face.
4. It is your way or the highway. If you are like that, then perhaps you shouldn't be in a relationship, or you need someone who will stay submissive. When we are talking about two adults you need to see one another as equal partners. You don't want a parent-child relationship and you don't want a relationship where one person is subordinate or a slave to the other.
5. You manipulate your partner or try to make your partner feel guilty. You do this by starting sentences with, "If you loved me you would....", "if you cared for me you would....", "I told you so..."
6. You are passive-aggressive. Instead of speaking up and dealing with issues directly you stonewall, you bang doors and leave the room, you tell someone they will never understand, you say nothing is the matter when everyone can see something is wrong.

7. In a fight you seek outside support from friends and family to have them on your side. You literally get people to side with you and gang up on your partner.
8. You refuse to take accountability for your actions and refuse to change and grow. You say things like, “that is just how I am and I am not going to change. I have always been like this”.
9. You are way too needy. I know people say things like I want a relationship and then I will be happy. Or they say things like I need someone to complete me. You need to be happy on your own. It is unfair to expect someone else to make you happy or fill huge gaps in your life. If you cannot be happy on your own, you are not likely to be happy in a relationship. Healthy relationships are about interdependence, not dependence.

Now these nine points are based on my own reading, experiences with clients, and research over quite a long period of time. As I was writing this article, my newsfeed (which Microsoft kindly selects for me based on all its tracking of my online activity) came up with an article by The Gottman Institute. The Gottman Institute provides interventions, tools, and research on relationships. This article which came up talks about “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”, a metaphor for the end of time. The four horsemen are four behaviours that the research has shown to be commonly linked to divorce. They are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

I have mentioned criticism. When we treat someone with contempt we are really mean to them - we mock them, we speak sarcastically, we ridicule them and call them names, we roll our eyes. In fact most of what we would call verbal/mental/emotional abuse can fall under the heading contempt. The partner is made to feel worthless. Defensiveness means making excuses, playing the victim, deflecting blame and responding to complaints with counter-complaints. Stonewalling is a form of passive-aggression. Research conducted by the Institute has found *contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce*.

When we embark on a career there is a lot of emphasis on studying and getting qualified and getting experience. When people go into relationships, somehow, they think they will just know how to do it. This usually changes after people have bad experiences. If you are looking for more information about how to make your relationships work, I usually refer people to The Gottman Institute website, email newsletters, and tools, as well as the books by Harville Hendrix which some of my clients have bought.