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Relationships are the hardest things we ever do. Some relationships are more challenging than others. They don't come with instructions so we've got to write our own. These are mine. Inspiration came from many sources, but mostly from spectacular mistakes. It's a few pages long; you might want to print it to read it.

This is a work in progress that will never, ever be finished. I am writing it for me because I need it. I shared it with a few friends and they suggested I share it with more. So share away. Maybe it can serve as compass when you get lost. Or as a prayer. (Is there a difference?)

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Poly for Dummies

Tell the Truth.

Lasting relationships are built on honesty. Honesty isn't easy but it gets to be a habit. Bite the bullet, tell the truth. If your relationship can't weather it, you are in the wrong relationship; but it probably can. Telling the truth really is easier than lying, all rumor and myth to the contrary. Lies are a lot of work. They weigh you down and isolate you. Small lies get lonely and seek out bigger lies.

Don't ask one lover to lie or keep secrets from others. Secrets breed distrust. Secrets build walls and discourage intimacy. Know the difference between privacy and secrecy.

Resist the desire to 'protect' someone by telling them what you think they want to hear. "Especially do not feign affection." If you're not sure about love, say so. If your relationships are not a high priority in your life, let people know. Encourage honesty in others. Above all, be honest with yourself; otherwise, it's impossible to be honest with other people. Don't fool yourself or pretend to be something you are not. Be up-front about your own shortcomings. Are you looking to build a family or for a little sexual variety?

Fear is usually what prevents honesty. Make it safe for people to tell their truth.

Know Yourself.

This is the most important tool and sometimes the hardest to find. Spend quality time with yourself and find out what you're like. Most people never do. Learn to tell when you are moody or unreasonable or defensive or hyper-sensitive or blinded by New Relationship Energy. Know your limits. If you are not able to be a good friend or lover to someone, tell them. Discover where you could do better. Know when close is too close. Learn what's healthy for you and what's not. Know the difference between being in love and being in need. Learn when to take a walk and cool off; grown-ups need time-outs too. Figure out what your priorities really are and live by. If your life doesn't reflect your priorities, change your life, not your priorities and today, not in some better future.

Many people never see the consistent patterns in their own behavior that are obvious to everyone else, like always pursuing the same type of lover or acting just like their father did. They are blind to themselves. What don't you know about yourself? You can transform your addictions into preferences and eventually into choices, but first you have to know about them.

Know what your true goals and expectations and needs are. Don't fall in love with a fantasy projection about who someone else is. If you are not compatible with them, admit it now, not after 10 years of fighting. Love

intentionally, not accidentally.

Take time to discover things like: what baggage are you carrying from your childhood or your last relationship, what do you need and what do you only want, what pushes your buttons and why, how are you still growing up, which things are you willing to compromise on, what are your core motivations, what makes you jealous or insecure or competitive, at what point are you over-extending yourself, what are your patterns, strengths and weaknesses, etc. A lot of this goes back to honesty.

Take Care of Yourself.

Work on you. “Grow your own garden in your own soul, don't wait for someone else to bring you flowers.” Instead of looking to other people for validation or satisfaction or happiness, learn to make it yourself. This is a vitally important skill for living, not just relationships. You will always be at someone's mercy - until you learn to satisfy your own needs. Once you do, you gain a freedom and confidence that can never be taken away. You can meet people as equals and choose to enjoy life together instead of carefully exchanging needs in a scarcity-driven emotional economy. Ironically, a person with this kind of independence is very attractive. (Just when we don't need it. Thanks.)

Take time by yourself to think about what you need to work on and give yourself the space to do it. Take care of yourself, be kind to yourself, like yourself, love yourself, accept yourself, forgive yourself, respect yourself, serve yourself, nurture yourself, just be yourself and please, sharpen a knife and cut yourself some slack. Everyone is too hard on themselves. Everyone's mirrors are warped. Yours are too; learn to compensate. Learn emotional first aid. Get your own shit together. Be number one in your life. Commit to yourself, marry yourself. Be your own best teacher, best friend. Don't lose your identity or sense of self in a relationship. Deal with your childhood/parent issues; if you don't bury your ghosts, they'll bury you. Your relationship with yourself is the foundation of all others.

Take Responsibility.

Own your feelings. No one can make you sad or angry or happy, they are your emotions. They exist in your head and nowhere else. You own them. You. There are always choices. Accept that sometimes you are going to feel good or bad for no reason at all - not because of the people or events in your life. Remember: the same person is always present whenever you have a relationship problem. When you make someone else accountable for your feelings or situation, you disempower yourself.

Playing the victim or martyr is just a way to manipulate people. To say, “I hurt you because my parents hurt me”, is to surrender your life to other people and to the past. Be here now. Take charge of your own feelings and actions and life. You are responsible for seeing that your own needs get met. (Yes, even your sexual needs.) Don't tell other people “do me, make me happy, protect me, save me.” Learn to take care of yourself.

Relationships take work. If there are problems in one of your relationships or if your life is a mess, stand up and carry your share of the responsibility (and no more), even if you don't think you deserve it. Taking responsibility is not taking blame, it's taking control. Remember leaving home. As you take more responsibility over your life, you have more freedom, not less.

Encourage Growth.

Remember to care about your lovers as human beings and as friends. It's surprisingly easy to forget. You can't be a good lover and a bad friend. Support them in advancing their careers, spiritual pursuits, educations and ambitions. At their own pace and in their own way. Help them to heal and understand themselves better. Encourage them to take time by themselves and give them the space they need. Help them cultivate strength. Ask them to do the same for you but tell them how; they can't read your mind. One way to encourage growth is to give those you love the freedom to love others.

Some people find neediness and weakness very attractive. Maybe they think they'll be abandoned if their loved ones become strong. They might try to keep people weak and needy so they'll stay. They might give generously but with conditions and strings attached. This is not unconditional love - it may not be love at all - it might just be aggressive need.

You can't be in a healthy or stable relationship with an unhealthy or unstable person. Be healthy and stable before you get close and encourage others to do the same.

Growth can be stunted by difficult emotions like insecurity or fear of abandonment. One way to manage a limiting emotion is to meet it head on. "The only way out - is through." Don't hide from it; that just gives it power. Dive in and weather it and survive it and examine it. Your fear is far worse than reality. Learn that and the emotion loses its power and you grow stronger. You can even use emotions like jealousy, insecurity, etc. to learn about yourself. Pay attention to them, they are valuable.

Respect.

Respect is for equals. Honor people's limits and boundaries. Listen when someone says 'no'. Demand the same. Never tolerate abuse of any kind. You deserve better. Be polite to your partners, they deserve it more than anyone in your life.

It's too easy to take partners for granted. Make commitments for a limited time and not for a lifetime. "Will you marry me for another year?" It helps you stay aware. Try not to save all your best stuff for one partner and exclude other partners, especially when they are together. Treat them evenly or someone will feel slighted. Words like "best", "most" and "favorite" force comparisons and make people compete and make someone lose. Find a way for everyone to win.

Respect relationships as well as people. Think of each relationship as a separate entity. It could be healthy or sick. It has a natural shape; don't try to force it to be something else. Find out what is it and let it be just that. Resist the desire to use a relationship to get your head in order; a lover is not a life raft. If you need therapy, see a doctor.

It's easy to project your expectations onto other people. "Maybe they'll change." Don't try to force a person to be someone they are not. People are package deals; accept them for who they are, good and bad, or don't accept them at all. Don't try to change yourself to make a relationship work.

If you want respect, keep your word. Keep to the spirit of your agreements; don't squabble over semantics looking for loopholes to exploit. When you make an agreement in the kitchen, keep it in the bedroom.

Communicate.

If you want healthy relationships, strong communication skills are a necessity, not a luxury. Trouble usually starts when talking stops. Things come up all the time that have to be worked through patiently and lovingly, even when you're having a bad day. It gets easier over time, but it takes work and a willingness to break up scar tissue and tear down walls. Communication skills are what make a person a great lover or a dud.

Arguing skills are not communication skills. Arguing better than someone doesn't make you right, it just makes you better at arguing. Some people strive to 'win' an argument at all cost - even if it costs them their marriage. You lose as soon as you decide that winning is important.

Listening is more important than talking. And harder. Listen actively and don't just hear. Make eye contact. Be here now, don't wander. Paraphrase their words to see if you heard them right. Notice your own words and feelings as you listen. Listen to unhappy feelings without needing to fix them. Listen to disagreements without taking sides. Listen to non-verbal communication, which usually speaks more clearly than words. Be aware of how the people in your life are loving you.

Some talk is not communication. If you get lost in the woods and pass the same landmark several times, you are making the same mistake over and over. Raising your voice or speaking harshly makes you harder to understand, not easier. Avoid saying "always" and "never" in disagreements; they just dig up the past and revive old mistakes. Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements. "I think you're wrong" is easier to accept than "you are wrong."

Express yourself clearly; people can't read your mind. Learn to ask for what you want. Tear down the wall between your feelings and your words. Don't tell people you're "fine" when you're not. If you set limits and boundaries, communicate them. Make sure everyone knows what they are getting into. Learn how to defuse

arguments. Learn how and when to say goodbye. Actions communicate better than words. Show people that you love them. Share kindness and affection and laughter. And when in doubt, rub their feet.

Attitude.

Having tools isn't enough, you have to really want to use them. Ya gotta wanna. Your disposition will make it work or blow it at any time. Find a way for everyone to win. Make important decisions unanimous. Don't go to sleep angry; talk it out. Shine a positive light on difficult situations too; many relationships wither from negative energy. Try not to turn little problems into big ones. Look for solutions, not someone to blame. Keep things constructive, even if it's not as satisfying. Be direct, not covert. Practice tolerance, patience, flexibility, generosity, understanding, forgiveness. Learn to apologize. Laugh at yourself.

Fear of imagined pain builds safe walls that keep out pain but also love. Dare yourself to take those walls down, surrender your expectations, love and get hurt, accept the good and bad unflinchingly, experience life. Better to live with sincerity and passion than to "laugh, but not all your laughter and weep, but not all your tears."

Be wrong; you can't learn from mistakes if you always gotta be right. Let it go; be happy instead. Listen more than you talk. Give someone else the last word. Take the high road. See things through their eyes; empathy is the cure for anger. Stay calm and remember to breathe. Let down your walls, trust, open up, risk and let yourself be vulnerable. Without vulnerability there is no intimacy. Emphasize friendship over romance. Take your time. Savor what you have instead of dwelling on what you don't have. Practice truly unconditional love. Share. Learn.

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These are my guidelines, I write them to deal with my issues. They have been useful with lovers but also with friends, children, parents and myself. The process of writing them was incredibly clarifying. The few hours invested made a big difference in the way I interact with the people I love most.

If you were writing advice to yourself, what would you include? Please share. If relationships really are the hardest things we ever do, we can use all the help we can get.

aloha,
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