

Relationship Health Check

Health24

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What does a healthy relationship look like? Would we recognise one when we see it? Are they laugh-a-minute ones or the endless dramas we see on TV? Or do we only find healthy relationships in real life?

Psychologist Ilse Terblanche says the media has a tendency to portray extremes - either very happy couples in comedies or very unhappy and intense couples in dramas. "The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle," she says. "It is unlikely any couple will be miserable or screeching with laughter 100 percent of the time."

So what are the signs of a healthy relationship?

Giving space. Those in healthy relationships are not clingy or overly dependent and they can give each other space in which to do their own thing. This doesn't mean they don't do anything together - on the contrary. But they don't feel they have to be with each other constantly like heart-lung machines. And they don't watch every move of their partner jealously. They are happy in themselves and don't need constant minute-by-minute approval, but they give support when it is called for.

Positive input. Couples who are happy together give each other emotional support and they don't put each other down in front of friends or family. They discuss the problems they may have in private and don't use social gatherings to air their grievances. There are few things less attractive than a husband or wife making cutting or damaging remarks to their spouse in front of others. Do this and be prepared for a social life that grinds to a halt.

Quiet times together. Happy couples do not need to talk to each other constantly. They can be quiet together as well - reading, pottering around the house or whatever, happy in the knowledge the other person is around, albeit quietly.

Equal sharing of tasks/responsibility. This is a huge one. If the major portion of the housework or the responsibility for the children and the household falls on one person, there is a problem. If only one of the spouses has a fulltime job, it is only fair that the lion's share of the household tasks be done by the other spouse. But in many cases, they both work full-time, yet one person still assumes more or less total responsibility for the household. Healthy couples do not function in this way.

Sense of humour. If a couple can laugh together, chances are they will stay together for a long time. It also means they have a similar outlook on life, and similar values and perceptions. No couple on earth can always agree with each other on everything - that is simply impossible, but a couple that can laugh can diffuse tension.

Enjoy socialising. Isolation is always a bad sign. Of course, it's different if you've just moved to a new place, but couples who don't take trouble over friendships or who don't make an effort to see people regularly, are probably not very happy. Jealous spouses will often try and isolate their partner from friends and family. If this happens, danger lights should begin flashing. If couples enjoy each other's company, they will more than likely enjoy seeing friends together as well.

Good sex life. What constitutes a good sex life is anyone's guess - different strokes for different folks, so to speak. But the essential thing is the couple themselves have to be happy with it. Open communication about sex is essential - if a couple can do this, there is little that will be able to destroy their relationship.

Joint financial responsibility. This does not necessarily mean that each of the spouses has

to contribute an equal amount, but it does mean that each spouse takes on a share of responsibility. This implies that neither of them will go out and buy designer clothes or golf clubs when the family is in financial trouble. A family is a unit and should function in that way - if it doesn't, chances are there are other serious problems as well.

Respect. This is both respect for one another, for the children and for other family members - whether you particularly like them or not. Yes, respect is mostly something that needs to be earned, but if you show no respect for your spouse or other family, you can hardly expect them to show respect for you. Respect implies giving space, respecting work commitments, respecting friendships and having basic respect for the other person as a separate human being with hopes, fears, dreams and desires.

Have fun together. Enjoying time together is essential for any good relationship. Having fun doesn't necessarily mean spending a lot of money. Two people can have fun walking in the park, having a cup of coffee, reading to each other, playing with the children. But if a couple can enjoy things together, the relationship has good long-term prospects.

Good listening skills. If your spouse asks you how you are, but does not listen to your answer, there's a problem. If your spouse chatters non-stop like a caged bird, your relationship could also be in trouble, because you would learn to switch off for your own self-preservation. Good listening skills are essential in any relationship, because a good listener will be able to access the underlying feelings to the words someone says. And most important of all, remember what the other person is saying.

United front to the children. Happy couples do not use the children to manipulate each other, or allow the children to manipulate them or let the children play them off against each other. A united front is important, as children very quickly sense when there is uncertainty in one of the parents regarding the application of certain rules, and they will abuse that. It is also important to minimise arguing in front of the children and the children need to see physical signs of affection like hugs.

Good conflict resolution skills. Your spouse has asked his/her parents to dinner on your birthday and you had a romantic candlelit dinner in mind. Or your spouse has spent money meant for the service on the car on a painting for the lounge - without consulting you. No relationship is without its conflicts, unless one of the two people has given up on retaining any form of individuality. But happy couples deal with conflict in a meaningful way. That is, a way in which it gets resolved and doesn't harden into insoluble resentments that stretch over decades.

Room to grow. Happy couples accept that people and their personalities and interests are not static. People change and their interests can also change over time. Happy couples allow each other the space within which this can happen. Unhappy couples try and pin someone down into a predictable and unchanging pattern.