



## 7 Relationship Problems and How to Solve Them

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It's a rare couple that doesn't run into at least a few relationship problems -- even when their love life is generally happy. It helps, experts say, to know what the most common problems in a relationship or marriage are. That way you'll have a better chance of getting through them if they occur in yours. Scott Haltzman, MD, is a clinical assistant professor of psychology at Brown University in Providence, R.I. "Knowing what to expect from relationships -- the good, the bad, and the ugly -- is the best way to make sure you're not looking for something that will never be there," Haltzman says.

Ideally, basic topics such as money, sex, and kids should be discussed before a couple decide to share their life together, says Margaret A. Cochran, PhD. Cochran is a San Francisco Bay area psychotherapist who coaches couples on resolving marriage problems and building romantic intimacy. But agreeing on these things, she says, doesn't guarantee that a marriage or long-term relationship is going to be trouble free.

Marriage and family therapist Terri Orbuch, PhD, director of the NIH-funded Early Years of Marriage project at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, has identified seven common relationship problems and ways to address them. Her suggestions can help you get a wobbly relationship back on track.

### Relationship problem #1: Lack of trust

Trust is an essential part of a relationship, Orbuch tells WebMD. "Trust becomes an issue when one partner doesn't feel the other is being honest, or doesn't have his or her best interests at heart," she says. It can become a major issue if one of you feels the other has a roving eye — or worse, sees signs of a cheating spouse.

Orbuch's solution is a "trust talk." You and your partner need to ask one another about your feelings about and experience with dependability and commitment. What are the behaviors that are causing you to lose trust in your partner or to doubt his or her commitment? Finally -- and Orbuch says you need to think about this carefully -- do you have unresolved issues of your own that hinder your ability to trust others? "You have to have a trustworthy partner," Orbuch says, "but you also have to have the ability to trust."

Mary Jo Fay, RN, MSN, author of *When Your "Perfect Partner" Goes Perfectly Wrong*, offers these tips to help you and your partner develop trust in each other.

- Be consistent.
- Be on time. When you have to be late, call and say you'll be late.
- Do what you say you will do, and call when you say you will call.
- Don't lie — not even little white lies — to your partner or to others.
- Be fair, even in an argument.
- Be sensitive to the other's feelings. You can still disagree, but don't discount how your partner feels.
- Carry your fair share of chores.
- Respect your partner's boundaries.
- Be a good listener.
- Try not to overreact when things go wrong.
- Don't dig up old wounds. Remember that once you say things, you can't take them back.
- Don't be jealous.

### **Relationship problem #2: Issues with sex**

Even partners who love each other can have problems in their sexual relationship, says Orbuch. Pointing to the thorny issues of frequency, satisfaction, types of sexual activity, and the role of physical intimacy in the rest of the relationship, Orbuch tells WebMD that the nature of sex can change over the course of a relationship. "The passage of time," she says, "affects sexuality. Most couples don't retain that urgent longing they first felt."

Talking about your sexual relationship not only gets the issue out in the open, but can also be arousing, says Orbuch. "Talk about your fantasies, how often you'd like to have sex, what things you might like to try," she says. For many women, talk leads to intimacy, though that's not always true for men. Passion can also be fueled by "newness." "Do something new and exciting with your partner," Orbuch says, "whether that's taking a cooking class together or arranging a mystery date."

### **Relationship problem #3: Not enough communication**

"Many couples assume that handling daily tasks is communicating," Orbuch says. "But true communication means sharing your goals and thoughts and dreams — not just talking about whose turn it is to pick up the kids."

Orbuch tells WebMD it's important to spend at least five minutes a day talking about topics other than work, your schedules, and your kids. "This can be in person, on the phone, or even in email," she says. "Or make a point of gathering at the dinner table each night to talk. This is important even if you're a couple without kids." Childless couples can get stuck in communication ruts, too.

Communicating with each other can go a long way toward resolving your relationship problems. But don't be hesitant to seek help from a professional counselor. "Whether you're a new couple, in the middle of your relationship, or long-established partners," says Orbuch, "a third party can help you if you get stuck."

### **Relationship problem #4: Money issues**

Money issues are a sore spot for many couples. Addressing them involves many questions, says Orbuch, from how much money you each think you should save to who earns more and who makes the financial decisions. "Money is an especially sensitive subject," says Orbuch. "People just don't like to talk about it."

Every three months, Orbuch says, you should schedule a "money talk." Make a list of short- and long-term financial goals, and plan for how much you're spending and how much you're saving. "It's not unusual for one partner to play a more primary role in money matters," says Orbuch, "but the other partner should be involved and aware. One person shouldn't be making big financial decisions alone."

### **Relationship problem #5: Dividing chores**

"Who does what at home can be a source of conflict between couples," says Orbuch. "Women like to feel that they're part of a team. It doesn't have to be 50-50, but it does have to be fair."

Orbuch says you should choose a time when you're not frustrated or angry and you're both feeling relaxed. Then discuss each of your expectations. Do you expect your husband to take out the trash? Does he expect you to cook dinner? If reality doesn't meet your expectations, instead of being frustrated, look for solutions together that may work better for each of you.

### **Relationship problem #6: Managing conflict**

Most couples argue from time to time. "It's not the amount of conflict, but how you handle it," says Orbuch. "Destructive behavior, such as yelling, shouting, or withdrawing, is not appropriate. You need to develop a constructive conflict style."

Start by bringing up your concerns in a timely way, Orbuch says, but find the right time to talk. That's not when the kids are clamoring for your attention, or when your partner has just walked in from work at the end of a

long day. Remain as calm as possible, and use "I statements" to explain how you think and feel. For example: "I feel neglected when you don't call if you're going to be late," instead of: "You're so thoughtless you can't even pick up a phone." And, Orbuch says, make sure you're really listening to what your partner is saying, not thinking about your response while he or she is talking. Keep lines of communication open — remember, disagreement doesn't necessarily mean disrespect.

### **Relationship problem #7: Maintaining compatibility**

Compatibility doesn't always mean having similar hobbies and interests, says Orbuch. Rather, it has more to do with having similar attitudes and values. "Couples who feel the same way about issues such as children, religion, and lifestyle are more likely to stay together," Orbuch says.

The solution again is to talk, says Orbuch. "You don't need to be compatible on all issues," she says, "but you should think alike on at least some of the major issues in your relationship." For the topics you don't agree on, Orbuch tells WebMD, you should discuss whether there's room for compromise or negotiation, and how this might affect your relationship. For instance, Orbuch says, "If one of you really wants children and the other really doesn't, you need to honestly evaluate whether you can maintain your relationship."

### **While You're Resolving a Relationship Problem**

If you're working on one of these relationship problems, says Karen Sherman, PhD, there are things you can do that will help you appreciate each other while you resolve them. Sherman, a New York psychologist and co-author of *Marriage Magic! Find It, Keep It, Make It Last*, says you should keep the following in mind.

1. Respect each other. Speak and behave respectfully toward one another. Don't humiliate or put your partner down, especially in public. When you speak with each other, speak as you did when you first started dating.
2. Show appreciation of one another. Say "thank you," and "I appreciate that you . . . ." It lets your partner know that he or she matters.
3. Be realistic. Thinking your mate will meet all your needs — and will be able to figure them out without your asking — is a Hollywood fantasy. "Ask for what you need directly," says Sherman.
4. Recognize that the two of you are different, come from different families, and have been raised differently. Rather than getting annoyed or assuming that your partner doesn't care, open up and be receptive to learn about your partner's different way of doing things.
5. Use humor. Learn to let things go, and enjoy one another more. Have fun!