

A Four-Step Maintenance Plan to Keep Your Relationship Strong

Early on, relationships are easy. Everything is new and exciting. You go on dates, take trips, spend time together and intentionally cultivate experiences that allow your relationship to grow.

Then, somewhere along the way, life happens.

One study on married couples in their 30s and 40s found that [their marital quality declined](#) over the course of a year, in terms of love, passion, satisfaction, intimacy and commitment. Too often, people shrug their shoulders and convince themselves this is just how it goes. Switching to relationship autopilot feels justifiable when you're short on time, low on energy and must focus on other priorities like careers and kids.

This is when doubt can creep in and tempt you to hit the reset button.

But maybe you're being too hard on a perfectly good relationship. Every couple experiences ups and downs, and even the very best relationships take effort.

Rather than getting out, it's time to get to work. Whether your relationship is already stuck in a rut, or you're trying to avoid ending up in one, most people need to focus more on what happens between "I do" and "I don't want to be with you anymore." [As a relationship scientist](#), I suggest the following four psychology research-based strategies to kickoff your relationship maintenance plan.

1. Use boredom As a Pivot Point

No one raises their hand and says, “Sign me up for a boring relationship.” But [boredom serves a purpose](#). Like your phone indicating your battery is low, boredom is an early warning system that your relationship needs a recharge.

At different times, all relationships experience boredom. Psychology researcher [Cheryl Harasymchuk and colleagues](#) have explored how people react. For example, to turn things around when you’re bored, do you fall back on things that are familiar and make you feel self-assured, like taking a walk around the neighborhood? Or do you choose growth-enhancing activities – like going for a hike on a new trail in an unfamiliar park – to mix things up?

It turns out that study participants preferred growth-enhancing activities when they were bored, and when given a chance to plan a date, they incorporated more novelty into those outings. Rather than resigning yourself to boredom’s inevitability – “This is just how relationships are” – use boredom as a call to action.

2. Keep Dating

Rather than wait for boredom to strike, couples would be wise to be more proactive. It’s as simple as continuing to date. Early in relationships, couples prioritize these one-on-one outings, but eventually begin to coast, just when the relationship could use an extra boost.

To recapture that early relationship magic, research shows that couples should [engage in new, challenging and interesting activities](#). Rather than sitting at staring at your phones, couples should break their routine and try something different. It could be as simple as trying a new restaurant, or even a new dish at a favorite place.

Not only does branching out counteract boredom, but trying new things helps you grow as a person. All of this spills over into the relationship, increasing levels of passion, satisfaction and commitment.

In one study, researchers asked married couples either to play games like Jenga, Monopoly, Scrabble, and UNO, or take an art class together. All couples [increased their levels of oxytocin](#) – the so-called “cuddle hormone” which [helps partners bond](#). But the art class couples had larger oxytocin increases and touched each other more, perhaps because the activity was newer and further outside their comfort zone. That novelty may encourage them to rely on each other for assurance.

3. Movie Nights

Not looking to dig out your oil paints? Here's a lower key option: Grab a spot on the couch and have a couples movie night. Over the course of a month, researchers asked some couples to watch and discuss a romantic comedy such as “When Harry Met Sally,” while others did an intense relationship workshop. Fast forward three years, and the movie watchers were [less likely to have broken up](#).

It probably isn't just taking in any film, but rather that watching a romantic story gives couples a less threatening way to discuss relationship issues. It may also help them see their relationship differently. That's important, because research from psychologist [Eli Finkel](#) and others shows that [viewing your own relationship through completely neutral eyes](#) helps couples hold off declines in marital quality.

4. Finding the Bright Spots

Activities are great, but you also need to do daily maintenance.

There's an old adage in psychology research that "[bad is stronger than good](#)." For relationships, that often means focusing on what's wrong, while overlooking what's right. Talk about self-defeating.

Of course, you can just as easily find the ways your relationship is thriving. Be more intentional about noticing your relationship's bright spots. Not only will you appreciate your partner more, but you can [use what's going well to help improve less bright areas](#).

Too often, people wait for something to break before trying to fix it. Adopting a maintenance mentality can more proactively help your relationship.

One new study tested a way to [help couples in already healthy relationships](#). The researchers' intervention had couples complete research-based positive psychology activities over four weeks such as:

- Write the story of their relationship, focusing on the positives, then share with their partner
- Write a letter of gratitude to their partner
- Identify their partner's strengths and their strengths as a couple
- Create a list of positive moments or activities partners want to share with each other. Pick one, and plan a time to do it
- Create a desired happiness chart and discuss what small relationship tweaks can help make it a reality.

At the end of the month, compared to couples on the study's waitlist, participants reported more positive emotions, better relationship functioning and improved communication. Another month later, their average relationship functioning remained better than that of the comparison group.

Few people enjoy cleaning, doing laundry or mowing the lawn. Yet, if you neglect those tasks, life quickly falls into

disrepair. Your relationship is just the same. Rather than thinking about replacements when your relationship shows signs of wear, invest the time and energy into a little maintenance. Using any or all of these easy-to-implement strategies should not only help a relationship survive, but hopefully even thrive.

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