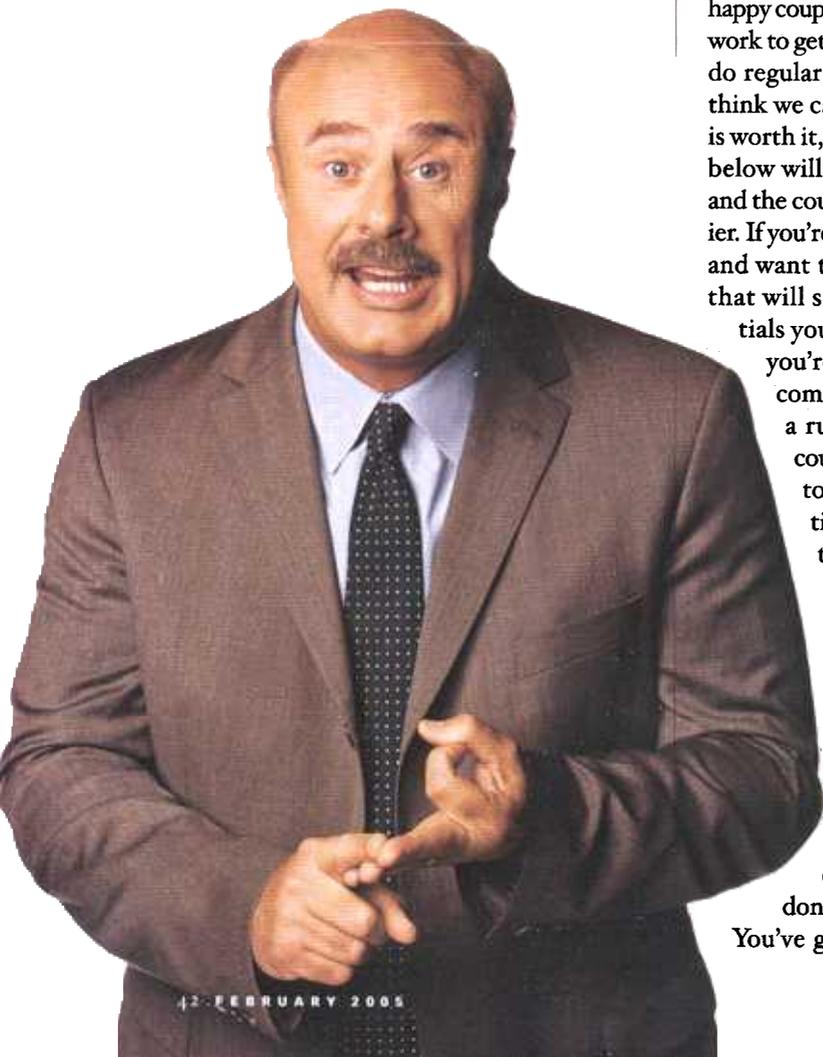


# Dr. Phil's Top Ten Ground Rules for Long-Term Loving

Note to college sweethearts, newlyweds, committed couples, and anyone who's ever hoped for a lasting love connection: Memorize this list. Put it on your iPod. Needlepoint it on your pillow. Now go forth and be happy ever after.

BY PHILLIP C. MCGRAW, PHD



RELATIONSHIPS ARE COMPLEX equations involving many variables, but when you break them down into their simplest elements, the formula becomes pretty straightforward: The quality of a relationship is a direct function of the extent to which it (1) is based on a solid underlying friendship and (2) meets the needs of the two people involved. To achieve success as a couple, both parties must be willing to foster the friendship and work through who needs what from whom to be happy. You may wonder: *If we really love each other, should it be such a project?* The answer is, absolutely. Most happy couples had to lay a lot of groundwork to get to where they are, and they do regular maintenance work. But I think we can all agree that the payoff is worth it, and the steps I've outlined below will help both the individuals and the couple be stronger and healthier. If you're just starting a life together and want to establish good patterns that will stick, these are the essentials you should carry with you. If you're veterans of coupledom—committed to each other but in a rut—here is your refresher course. Because when it comes to creating a successful relationship, it's never too early to start, and never too late to start over.

## 1. KNOW YOURSELF

For two people to be happy together, they have to feel their needs are being met. But there's not a soul on earth who can meet your needs if you don't even know what they are. You've got to do some self-explo-

ration so you know firmly who you are, what you value, and what will fulfill you. Is what's most important to you that your husband is proud of you? That your children feel safe and secure? That you feel protected? Respected and valued? Desired and idealized? Be honest about what your emotional, physical, spiritual, and social needs are, and don't feel compelled to justify any of them. They're not right or wrong; they just are. And getting real about them is the crucial first step to giving your partner a fair shot at loving you the way you want to be loved.

## 2. LET YOUR PARTNER IN

Every one of us has a private reality made up of the parts of ourselves that we don't often reveal. You can be intimate with someone only when you share that side of yourself, when you are both willing to say, "I love you enough to let you in. I am entrusting you with the most fragile part of my soul." It's one of the scariest and most difficult things you'll ever do, because it leaves you completely vulnerable. But it will also bring the two of you closer than ever before. That said, one of the biggest mistakes couples make is to have meaningful conversations and exchanges only when they are in crisis mode. It's important to create opportunities during open-ended, peaceful moments that are free of distraction or potential interruptions. You have to be ready to reveal your most private thoughts, what scares you, what your hopes and dreams are for yourself and for your relationship. If it's hard for you to open up in person, there's nothing wrong with putting your thoughts down on

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### 3. ASK FOR WHAT YOU WANT

Your partner can't read your mind. Until you can be clear about what you want, you make it difficult for him to love you. He's left guessing or lost—not an effective strategy for a good relationship. (If you think that you shouldn't have to spell it out in the first place, you've been watching too many romantic comedies.) Put your fears aside—fears of rejection, inadequacy, abandonment, or conflict—and grant yourself permission to have and to express expectations. I'm not suggesting that you start complaining or dropping subtle hints about how you wish things were different. And don't try to have this conversation in the middle of an argument or as a reaction to having your feelings hurt. This should not be a laundry list of what's wrong with him; you're exploring what both of you can be doing better as a couple. Wait until the waters are calm to sit down and talk specifics. Focus first on what might be missing for him, and what you can do to be a better spouse.

Then introduce some ideas about how he can reciprocate. If you are an adult child of divorce and have a fear of abandonment, say so. Explain to your partner that a part of you assumes that those you love will leave. Tell him what you need in order to be convinced that he has no intention of disappearing. If you were never made to feel special as a child and have suffered a lack of self-esteem, then be honest enough to say that you need his validation. If you have doubts about your intellect or competence, ask him to consult you when making decisions. Of course, there are exceptional cases. If you have terrible body image issues, then no matter how many times he tells you that he thinks you're the sexiest woman alive, you probably won't believe him. You can't ask him to be responsible for things he can't control. But in every case where your partner can realistically address and fulfill your needs, ask him to!

That's his job, and only when he understands what makes you tick will he be able to make you happy.

### 4. LEARN YOUR PARTNER'S NEEDS, AND STRIVE TO FULFILL THEM

I talked about discovering the most private parts of your partner's soul. Once you have, and you know things about him that few others know, consider what you can do for him that no one else can. How can you support him? Protect him? Help him feel complete and happy? Part of the challenge here is that many men believe that relying on other people, especially emotionally, is a sign of weakness. But until a man can get honest about the fact that he has needs, and then figure out what they are, it will be very difficult for him to be intimate with you. Explain that it's important to you to feel needed. Try to use palatable language: Instead of saying "What do you need from me?" try "What do you value from me? What is it that I do or say that's most important to you?" Whether or not they admit it to themselves or their partners, many men want desperately to hear that their wives are proud of them. I know I do. I get plenty of validation from viewers and readers, but that pales in comparison to

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knowing that my wife is proud of who I am and what I do. Until we discussed it, she could not have understood how much this means to me. It may be hard to get your partner to tell you specifically what he needs; in that case, just offer your general support. If he's like many men I've talked to, the best way to make him feel good about himself as a father, a provider, a husband, and a man is to tell him that in all of these capacities you're incredibly proud of him.

### 5. INVEST IN THE FRIENDSHIP

Anyone who played a sport or joined a club in high school remembers the hours of commitment and hard work that went into it. Do you extend at least the same effort, energy, and focus to your significant other? Do you face challenges together and take pleasure in each other's successes? Do you pay attention to each other, spend time together, have fun and laugh? Are you always honest with each other? Talk about things he cares about, ask about his feelings, express interest in his life, and challenge yourself daily to understand his experience in this world. Invest the time and energy to make the friendship strong, and expect the same from him. Ideally, the early stages of your relationship were based on common interests before romance even came into play. Take a step back, and focus on the friendship again.

### 6. LIVE THE LOVE YOU FEEL

I've had husbands and wives tell me that their spouses mean the world to them, that they feel endless adoration and affection for them but don't know how to show that love. They go about their daily business of working, eating, and watching the kids, then they turn out the lights without ever demonstrating their love to their partner. They think that simply holding it in their hearts is enough. But that's like feeling compassion for the homeless: Until you do something about your feelings, nobody gets shelter or food. Love must be a verb.

It's important that you don't confuse love with romance. Showing your love means exploring the little things you can do to improve each other's lives. Ask yourself how you can make his day better. Is there some way you can help him decompress? What creature comforts does he value that you could provide? Perhaps you could slip a sweet note into his shirt pocket in the morning that he'll find in the middle of the day. Or call him at work with no purpose other than letting him know that you're thinking of him. If problems are all you ever deal with in a relationship, then you have *CONTINUED ON PAGE 46*

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 44 a problem relationship. If you call him only when you've got a complaint, then it's time to pick up the phone just to hear his voice.

As you take these steps to put your love into action, you could offer him an idea or two about how he can return the favor. Many women feel loved when their partner eases their burden—by bathing the kids, taking out the trash, or paying the bills. I hear so often from women that flowers or a box of chocolates isn't anywhere near as wonderful as hearing their husband say, "Why don't you go take a long bath and let me clean the kitchen." Or "You've been on your feet all day. Sit down and relax, and I'll put the kids to bed." Acts of kindness, affection, and support accumulate across time to create positive momentum in the relationship.

When you are doing these things for each other, then you are living the love you feel.

## 7. DON'T LET SEX FALL OFF YOUR TO-DO LIST

Physical intimacy is a crucial part of any relationship, but it's also one of the most common areas of conflict. Each partner has individual needs and very different physiologies. Disparities in sexual appetite, intensity, and timing can make sex seem difficult, inconvenient, and insignificant. Once you think of it as a luxury, it becomes trumped by the necessities: *I must go to work; I don't have to have sex. The kids must get to school; it's not essential that we are physically intimate.* But you need to prevent day-to-day life from crowding sex out. Now, make sure your expectations are realistic. Romance and sex change once you're past the initial infatuation. It may not be as dizzying or breathless as the honeymoon, but it need not become less important or less satisfying. Be sensitive, flexible, and open about what you want. And remember that we're not just talking about physical satisfaction; your sexual needs may overlap with your emotional demands. It makes perfect sense that you'd be better able to receive your partner's romantic advances if he helped lighten your load. Likewise, it might help him to hear that you love his body. This goes back to being able to express what

you need. Talk to each other, move sex higher up on your priority list, and then do something about it.

## 8. LEAD BY EXAMPLE

I once asked a woman who was married more than 50 years what her secret was. She answered, "My husband and I never fell out of love at the same time. There were times when I wasn't feeling it, and

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he carried us through, and vice versa. But now we're happier than the day we met." It doesn't take two people on the same page at all times to create a loving relationship. You can make a huge difference without the active or conscious participation of your partner. Wake up every morning and ask yourself: *What can I do to make my relationship more loving?* Instead of complaining about the flowers you're not getting or waiting for him to return to his old romantic ways, stimulate your relationship to get headed in the right direction. If you start living the love you feel, it's bound to rub off on him. Jack Nicholson has a line in the movie *As Good as It Gets* that perfectly encapsulates my point. He leans across a restaurant table and says to Helen Hunt, "You make me want to be a better man." I can't imagine a greater compliment—all couples should strive to bring out the best in each other. If it falls to you to get the ball rolling, so be it. Your small kindnesses will likely be appreciated and, finally, reciprocated.

## 9. BE HAPPY, NOT RIGHT

When you decide that it's happiness you're striving for, you'll take a completely different approach to engaging your partner. Marriage is not 50-50. It's 100-100—a ratio that doesn't work if you're thinking, *Why should I have to be the one to do it?* Or *Isn't it his turn?* It's not a matter of

what's fair, or standing your ground on principle until your partner gets on the same page. That has never worked, and it never will. Once your relationship is working and you're getting what you want, you won't care who "started it" or whose "turn" it is to make the next move. The next time you find yourself playing a waiting game to see how long it will take him to figure out that it's his turn to light a candle and initiate foreplay, stop and ask yourself, *Do I want to be right, or do I want to get some loving?* I strongly suggest that you stop keeping score, slacken your sense of justice a little, swallow your pride, and even bite your tongue if you have to. I promise you that you'll be more likely to get what you want. Note: If you're not being treated with dignity and respect or you feel you're com-

promising the core values that define you, then the relationship is too imbalanced. You should never interact with your life partner in a way that leaves you feeling worse about who you are. Here's a simple litmus test: Do you generally feel better when you're with your partner than when you're not? If the answer is no, it's time for some serious renegotiating.

## 10. TAKE IT FROM THE TOP

If you feel that you're past the help of all these suggestions, that you've let the friendship get stale and waited too long to take action, take a little break from your daily reality. Spend a little time rediscovering what it is about your partner that first appealed to you. Think back to before you both had so much invested, before problems took center stage, and before sensitivities started running so high. Did you used to laugh more? Talk to each other and share more? Was there more time to be in love? Notice how life has put both of your wishes on the back burner, and discuss this with him. Decide that the two of you will settle for nothing less than living the love you feel for the rest of your lives. Starting right now. ●

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