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10 Ways to Perk Up Your Relationship

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If you've ever gotten relationship advice, you've probably heard plenty of don'ts. Don't nag. Don't stonewall. Don't blame. Don't leave the toilet seat up, don't squeeze the toothpaste tube from the middle, and definitely don't assume he's that into you when he's just not. Well, don't listen.

The happiest couples focus on do's, not don'ts. Rather than just steering clear of negative interactions, they actively work to build positivity into their relationships. They show what psychologists call an "approach orientation," moving toward what's good, rather than moving away from what's bad.

Traditionally, couples research has focused more on minimizing negatives (arguments, emotional distance, infidelity) than on maximizing positives. But a new wave of research is changing all that. Positivity-oriented psychologists find that maintaining a favorable balance of positive to negative emotions helps people—and relationships—thrive. "We've already learned about all the toxic stuff that harms relationships," says psychologist Dacher Keltner, author of *Born to Be Good*. "There's a whole new science of how to build in good emotions."

Positivity has a way of shifting our perspective: While negative emotions shut us down, positive emotions open us up. They help us "broaden and build," argues Barbara Fredrickson, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of *Positivity*. Positive emotions actually spur big-picture thinking, yielding benefits like keener peripheral vision and increased creativity—not to mention better relationships.

"Finding ways to inject humor and lightness into a difficult situation is not merely a distraction," says Fredrickson, "It actually helps people see possibilities." Partners stuck in a "one-note song" should move towards greater positivity by seizing "micro-opportunities" to connect, she says. Positive emotion is about more than just having fun—it includes gratitude, inspiration, and curiosity.

When participants do a "loving-kindness meditation," a form of meditation focused on generating warm and tender feelings toward others, the quotient of positive emotions in their lives increases, which in turn boosts relationship satisfaction, Frederickson has found.

In fact, just setting more positive goals for your relationship can make you happier as a couple. Couples who seek to increase the good in their relationships, concentrating on sharing fun and meaningful experiences together, promoting growth and development in

the relationship, and creating satisfaction and intimacy ("approach-oriented goals"), fare better than couples focused on ducking the negatives ("avoidant-oriented" goals), says Emily Impett, a researcher at UC Berkeley.

You may not always achieve all the positives you seek—but it's enough to realize that positivity is important and to set goals reflecting that. The payoff is great: more fun, more growth, better sex, and more sustained intimacy.

1: Be grateful.

Remembering to thank your partner seems simple, but gratitude may provide the everyday dose of spackle that keeps you glued together over the long haul. "Gratitude helps remind us of the good qualities in our partners," says Sara Algoe, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "It reminds people to attend to the others in their lives."

In a study of cohabitating couples, on days that one partner expressed more gratitude, the other felt more satisfied with the relationship. "We get into these routines and start taking our partners for granted," says Algoe. "But gratitude can work as a booster shot, injecting positive emotion into the relationship."

A low-quality expression of gratitude focuses on the object—"Thank you for cooking dinner, I was really hungry," explains Fredrickson. It's much better to focus on the other person: "You're such a great cook; it's so thoughtful of you to cook for me!"

"A lot of people express their appreciation in self-absorbed ways," Fredrickson says. "But when the expression of gratitude focuses on the other person, we find the other person walks around feeling better about themselves—and six months later, the relationship is stronger."

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Most couples focus on avoiding conflict, but happy couples know how to maximize the positive.

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Most couples focus on avoiding conflict. But happy couples know how to maximize the positive—teasing each other, providing support in secret, and, when called for, taking the focus off their partner.

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