

Expert suggests tried-and-true strategies to strengthen your relationship

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What are you doing to keep your relationship alive? A University of Illinois study highlights the importance of five relationship maintenance strategies that couples can use to preserve or improve the quality of an intimate relationship.

"Relationships are like cars in that you have to do certain things to keep them running, especially when your goal is to strengthen and preserve your bond with your partner," said Brian Ogolsky, a U of I professor of human and community development.

To determine which factors are the most important in promoting [healthy relationships](#), Ogolsky and colleague Jill R. Bowers conducted a [meta-analysis](#) of 35 studies and 12,273 individual reports.

The research showed that [openness](#), positivity, assurances, shared tasks, and a shared social network are strategies that [couples](#) can use to make their [relationship](#) better, he said.

To "open up" your relationship, the researchers encouraged not only talking about your [feelings](#) but getting your partner to talk about what she is feeling as well. Positivity entailed being a "fun" person and acting upbeat and cheerful as you interact with each other.

"It's also important to assure your partner that you're in the relationship for the long haul, to divide household chores and responsibilities equally, and to make an effort to include your partner's friends and family in

some of your activities," Ogolsky said.

The study showed that a person who practices one of these five strategies is likely to practice the others as well. And a partner who notices that one of the strategies is being used is apt to be tuned in to their partner's efforts in the other four areas, he said.

"Persons who use any of these maintenance strategies will not only be more satisfied with and committed to their relationship, they are also likely to continue to love and, yes, even like each other throughout its [duration](#)," he said.

Although these strategies work, challenges may arise when couples don't see or value each other's efforts in the same way. These approaches had the most influence on the quality of the relationship when persons believed their partner was also performing relationship maintenance, he said.

The study suggests that what you do doesn't matter as much as whether the things you're doing are noticed by your partner. In other words, he said, relationship quality is not only at risk when couples don't employ these strategies, but also when one partner believes the other is not making an effort or doesn't recognize those efforts.

Sometimes a person's thoughts don't transfer into actions, he explained. "Say you've arrived home from work and your intention all day has been to buy some flowers for your partner and surprise her with dinner. Then you get wrapped up in a business phone call and your good intentions fall by the wayside. You may feel as if you've put considerable effort into your relationship, but your partner didn't see it so it does you no good."

The fact that couples get busy, become enmeshed in routines, and take each other for granted is all the more reason to consciously adopt these

relationship strategies, he said.

"Even a small attempt at maintenance, such as asking how your [partner](#)'s day was, sending a humorous text to make him laugh, or picking up the phone and calling your mother- or father-in-law, can have a positive impact on your relationship and make you happier," he added.

More information: A meta-analytic review of relationship maintenance and its correlates is available pre-publication online in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* at [spr.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... /20/0265407512463338](https://sagepub.com/content/early/.../20/0265407512463338)

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