

Your relationship may be better than you think – find the knot

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There's an old saying, "When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot in it and hang on." In other words, before you give up, take matters into your own hands and try a little harder.

As a psychology researcher, I believe this adage applies to relationships, too. Before you let go, look for the "knots" that might save you from accidentally letting a great relationship slip from your grasp.

Relationship science suggests that the problem is that people tend to overemphasize the negative and underappreciate the positive when looking at their romantic partners.

If you could build the perfect relationship, what would it look like? Perhaps more importantly, how does your current relationship stack up? Expectations for today's relationships are higher than ever. Now that relationships are a choice, mediocrity isn't acceptable. It's all or nothing, and no one wants to settle.

The secret to avoiding settling seems simple: have high standards and demand only the very best. Researchers refer to people who are pickier than others and always want the absolute best possible option as maximizers. Their counterparts are satisficers – those satisfied once quality surpasses a minimum threshold of acceptability. For them, "good enough" is perfectly fine. As long as their relationship exceeds their predetermined benchmarks for "high quality," satisficers are content.

Maximizer personalities will tend to exhaust all options and explore many possibilities to secure the flawless partner. You might think that sounds ideal, even noble, almost like common sense. But there are hidden downsides. Call it the myth of maximization, because the research reveals that maximizers report more regret and depression and feel threatened by others whom they perceive as doing better.

Maximizers also experience lower self-esteem and less optimism, happiness and life satisfaction. And they prefer reversible decisions or outcomes that are not absolute or final.

See the problem? In long-term relationships, people tend to prefer more of a "'til death do us part" approach rather than a "'til I find something

better" tactic. Overall, the implication for your relationship is clear: The continuous pursuit of perfection could be fine for a car, but in your relationship it may result in failing to recognize the truly great relationship that's right in front of you for what it is. Impossibly high standards can make an excellent relationship seem average.

You may also undervalue your relationship by being too quick to identify imperfections, notice the negatives and find problems. Blame what psychologists call the negativity bias, which is a [tendency to pay attention to the bad or negative](#) aspects of an experience.

In other words, when your relationship is going well, it doesn't register. You take it for granted. But problems? They capture your attention. The bickering, insensitive comments, forgotten chores, the messes and the inconveniences – all stand out because they deviate from the easily overlooked happy status quo.

This tendency is so pronounced that when a relationship doesn't have any major issues, research suggests that [people inflate small problems into bigger ones](#). Rather than be thankful for the relative calm, people manufacture problems where none previously existed. You could be your own worst enemy without even realizing it.

Time to recalibrate. The key is separating the critical from the inconsequential in order to distinguish minor issues from real problems. Identifying the true dealbreakers will allow you to save your energy for real problems, and allow the minor stuff to simply fade away.

Data from a [representative sample](#) of over 5,000 Americans, ranging in age from 21 to over 76, identified the [top 10 relationship dealbreakers](#):

- Disheveled or unclean appearance
- Lazy

- Too needy
- Lacks a sense of humor
- Lives more than three hours away
- Bad sex
- Lacks self-confidence
- Too much TV/video games
- Low sex drive
- Stubborn

Beyond that list, there are certainly annoyances that can become dealbreakers in otherwise generally healthy relationships. And if your partner disrespects, hurts or abuses you, those are behaviors that shouldn't be ignored and should rightly end your relationship.

In a follow-up study, researchers asked participants to consider both dealbreakers and dealmakers – that is, qualities that are especially appealing. When determining whether a relationship was viable, it turned out the dealbreakers carried more weight. The negativity bias strikes again. The fact that people tend to focus more on the breakers than the makers is further evidence that we're not giving some aspects of our relationship enough credit.

To help you better appreciate your partner's good qualities, consider the [qualities individuals find most desirable](#) in a marriage partner.

What do people value in a potential mate?

Researchers asked over 300 heterosexual newlyweds and daters what traits they preferred in a spouse. Contrary to gendered stereotypes, there's a lot of overlap on the lists of men and women.

	BY WOMEN	BY MEN
1	Warm	Reliable
2	Reliable	Warm
3	Fair	Fair
4	Intelligent	Intelligent
5	Knowledgeable	Knowledgeable
6	Trusting	Conscientious
7	Secure	Trusting
8	Hardworking	Hardworking
9	Emotionally stable	Secure
10	At ease	At ease
11	Perceptive	Emotionally stable
12	Lenient	Perceptive
13	Conscientious	Even-tempered
14	Energetic	Energetic
15	Generous	Practical
16	Sociable	Curious
17	Curious	Sociable
18	Well-organized	Creative
19	Flexible	Well-organized
20	Relaxed	Relaxed

Credit: The Conversation

What have you been missing in your relationship? Surely there are boxes that your partner checks that you've neglected to notice. Start giving credit where credit is due.

In fact, some studies suggest you should give your partner even more credit than she or he might deserve. Instead of being realistic, give your partner the benefit of the doubt, with an overly generous appraisal. Would you be lying to yourself? Sure, a little bit. But research shows that these types of [positive illusions help the relationship](#) by decreasing conflict while increasing satisfaction, love and trust.

Holding overly optimistic views of your partner convinces you of their value, which reflects well on you – you're the one who has such a great partner, after all. Your rose-colored opinions also make your [partner](#) feel good and give them a good reputation to live up to. They won't want to let you down so they'll try to fulfill your positive prophecy. All of which benefits your relationship.

It's time to stop being overly critical of your relationship. Instead find the knots, the parts of your relationship you've been taking for granted that will help you hold on. If you know where to look and what to appreciate, you may just realize there are a lot more reasons to happily hold onto your [relationship](#) than you thought.

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