

7 research-based resolutions that will help strengthen your relationship in the year ahead

December 29 2020, by Gary W. Lewandowski Jr.

The new year is going to be better. It has to be better. Maybe you're one of the [74% of Americans](#) in one survey who said they planned on hitting the reset button on Jan. 1 and resolving to improve. Those [New Year's resolutions most commonly focus on](#) eating healthier, exercising, losing weight and being a better person.

Admirable goals, to be sure. But focusing on body and mind neglects something equally important: your romantic [relationship](#). Couples with [better marriages report higher well-being](#), and a recent study found that having a better romantic relationship not only promoted well-being and [better health](#) now but that [those benefits extend into the future](#).

The lesson is clear: Your relationship is important. Resolve to get it right.

That doesn't mean you have to be perfect. But here are seven resolutions based on recent psychological research that you can make this New Year to help keep your relationship going strong.

1. Set yourself up for success

Adjust your mindset so you see your relationship as a key [source of positive experiences](#). [Psychologists like me](#) call this boosting your social approach motivation. Instead of merely trying to avoid relationship

problems, those with an approach motivation seek out the positives and [use them to help the relationship](#).

Here's how: Imagine a conversation with your partner. Having more of an approach motivation allows you to focus on positive feelings as you talk and to see your partner as more responsive to you. Your partner gets a burst of positivity, too, and in return sees you as more responsive. One partner's good vibes spill over to the other partner, ultimately benefiting both. After a year when your relationship may have felt unprecedented external strains, laying the foundation to take advantage of any positives is good place to start.

2. Be optimistic

While things in the past may not have always gone how you wanted, it's important to be optimistic about the future. But the right kind of optimism matters. A [2020 research study](#) from [Krystan Farnish](#) and [Lisa Neff](#) found that generally looking on the bright side of life allowed participants to deal with relationship conflict more effectively—as they put it, better able to "shake it off"—than did those who were optimistic specifically about their relationship.

It seems that if people focus all their rosy expectations just on their relationship, it encourages them to anticipate few negative experiences with their partner. Since that's unrealistic even in the best relationships, it sets them up for disappointment.

3. Increase your psychological flexibility

[Try to go with the flow](#). In other words, work on accepting your feelings without being defensive. It's OK to adjust your behaviors—you don't always have to do things the way you always have or go the places you've

always gone. Stop being stubborn and experiment with being flexible.

A recent study by [Karen Twiselton](#) and colleagues found that [when you're more flexible psychologically](#), relationship quality is higher, in part because you experience more positive and fewer negative emotions. For example, navigating the yearly challenge of holidays and family traditions is a relationship minefield. However, if both partners back away from a "must do" mentality in favor of a more adaptable approach, relationship harmony will be greater.

4. It's OK to put 'me' before 'we'

It's easy for some people to play the self-sacrificing martyr in their [romantic relationship](#). If this sounds like you, try to focus more on yourself. It doesn't make you a bad person or a bad partner. When you're psychologically healthy, your partner and your relationship also benefit.

Recent research identified [four main traits that are part of good mental health](#): openness to feelings, warmth, positive emotions and straightforwardness. These traits help with being more clear about who you are, feeling better about who you are, expressing greater optimism and less aggression, exploiting others less and exhibiting less antisocial behavior. You can see how what's good for you in this case would be good for your partner too.

5. Do something for your partner

But it's not all about you. Putting your partner first some of the time and catering to your partner's desires is part of being a couple. A 2020 study by [Johanna Peetz](#) and colleagues found that [prioritizing your partner](#) makes you feel closer to them, increases positive feelings, reduces negative ones and boosts perceived relationship quality.

In the [new year](#), look for ways to give your partner some wins. Let them get their way from time to time and support them in what they want to do, without exclusively prioritizing your own wants and needs.

6. Don't be so hard on yourself

So many New Year's resolutions focus on body image. Aspirations to eat better and work out often stem from the same goal: a hotter body. Yet, research from [Xue Lei](#) shows that you may not really know what your partner wants you to look like.

[Women tend to overestimate how thin](#) male partners want them to be. Similarly, men believe that female partners want them to be more muscular than women say they do. It may seem harmless, but in both cases individuals are more critical and demanding toward themselves, in part based on misreading what a partner truly desires.

7. Stay in touch

I saved the easiest item on the list for last: Touch your partner more. When [Cheryl Carmichael](#) and colleagues followed 115 participants over a 10-day period, [they found that initiating and receiving touch](#) – things like holding hands, cuddling, kissing—were associated with both a boost in closeness and relationship quality. Importantly, being touched by your partner has the added benefit of making you feel more understood and validated. Who couldn't use more of that in the coming year?

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