

# Relationship Advice: Talking Through the Tough Times



By Dr. Jane Greer

Sustaining a marriage or an ongoing relationship can be hard, and everybody hits different rough patches along the way where they think they made a mistake choosing their partner and they can't see a lasting future together. Even in what seems like a great connection, there are times when people think they want out. Fortunately, in most cases, they don't act on these heat-of-the-minute thoughts, but rather look to find ways to move past them. Neil Patrick Harris and his husband David Burtka recently talked about how they keep their 15-year relationship happy and healthy. The couple, who share 8-year-old twins and got married in September 2014, said that for them it is all about communication. They said they try not to let emotions

and disappointments get bottled up, but instead talk through the issues before they become too big to overcome. That's a good strategy for everyone.

**How can you navigate the potholes you hit in your relationship and get out of them so you don't get stuck, and can instead continue to go the distance and stay on track? Check out this relationship advice from Dr. Jane Greer.**

Often, in the surge of anger, one person may tell the other that it's over and they want out. While they might mean it when they say it, they don't actually intend to follow through and leave or make the other person leave. I call this the Deal Breaker Card, and it gets played when somebody has reached their last nerve and feels a sense of hopelessness that their relationship is ever going to change and get better. While it offers a sense of relief as well as control so they don't feel trapped, and sometimes is meant to intimidate their partner into shaping up and let them know they aren't kidding about how upset they are, it does in fact work against you. In order to get through the tough times, you need to feel like you are a team and have a we're in this together bond. Once you play the Deal Breaker Card, it is going to shake the foundation of your union and create anxiety and insecurity for your significant other. Your partner is now going to focus on – wow, we can be broken – which can deplete the trust you share and might make your partner no longer feel safe with you, which can get in the way of being able to focus on the issues to make the changes necessary to improving the relationship. It takes away from the sense of being a team, the idea that

you can get through anything. Instead of strengthening your sense of resilience, it divides you and can make it harder to get through the conflict. So while you may feel like telling your partner that's it, I'm out, we're through, avoid playing the Deal Breaker Card. Think it, but don't say it. What you might say is that sometimes you feel hopeless about your relationship going forward and you wish it can get better, which makes room for your partner to feel encouraged and work with you to make that happen. Take Neil and David's lead and acknowledge that you are at a fragile place and talk about how you will be able to get beyond it and endure over time. Discuss what you are facing, knowing that the problems in front of you are real and in order to stay together you should try to do your best to talk through them. Instead of playing the Deal Breaker Card, use that anger to consider seeking the help of a counselor, or make a clear effort to work harder to listen to each other. See it as a chance to pay more attention to your mutual needs so whatever argument you are having doesn't bring you to the end of the road.

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Another thing to be aware of is what I call Love You, Mean It, Hate You, Mean It moments. I talk about these in my book *What About Me? Stop Selfishness From Ruining Your Relationship*, and most couples deal with these at one time or another. No matter how much you love your partner, at some point he or she is going to do something that angers, frustrates, or disappoints you and, when that happens, you might feel like you actually hate them. This is totally normal, it's the natural ambivalence that is a part of every relationship. It often surprises people because when they fall in love they typically imagine that is how they will always feel for each other and they can't imagine ever having feelings of hate for the other person. However, as I explain in my book, most loving feelings in an adult relationship are conditional and subject to how

you treat each other. Loving gestures beget loving feelings, and the same goes for negative behavior. With that in mind, accept it and use it as a tool to acknowledge your anger and disappointment. You might even consider developing a shorthand in which you say, Hate You, Mean It, just to let each other know when one of you has done something upsetting. Neil and David joked about using tasers to get through to each other, which is a variation on this theme. Keep in mind that you always want to balance out the Hate You, Mean It moments with the Love You, Mean It moments so you can focus on the positive.

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There is no question that maintaining a solid relationship is challenging and requires prioritizing each other along with truly listening and sharing your time and attention. This is what Neil and David say has gotten them through and continues to keep them on solid ground. That, and a little humor such as their kidding about the tasers always helps. Hopefully, if you find yourself wanting to play the Deal Breaker Card or being flooded in a Hate You, Mean It moment you will be able to take a step back and remember why you fell in love with this person in the first place, so that you can sprinkle some Love You, Mean It moments and therefore make it worth the trouble to try to find your way to those feelings again.

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