

# 10 Steps to a Remarkable Relationship



By Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.

This Valentine's Day, give your partner the best gift of all – a remarkable relationship! Dr. Harriet Lerner, one of our nation's most loved and respected relationship experts, reminds us that while it takes two people to couple up, it only takes one to make things a whole lot better. Here's how:

**1. Warm your Partner's Heart.** Make a concerted effort to focus on the positive. Do three little things every day that make your partner feel loved, valued and special.

**2. Dial Down the Criticism.** People become more allergic to criticism over time. Remember this: No one can survive in a

marriage (at least not happily) if they feel more judged than admired.

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**3. Apologize.** You can say, “I’m sorry for my part of the problem” even if you’re secretly convinced that you’re only 28% to blame.

**4. Don’t Demand an Apology.** Don’t get into a tug of war about his failure to apologize. An entrenched non-apologizer may use a nonverbal way to try to defuse tension, reconnect after a fight, or show he’s in a new place and wants to move toward you.

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**5. Stop Being So Defensive.** Defensiveness is the archenemy of listening. The next time your partner has a criticism try to listen only to understand—that is, no interrupting, offering advice, defending your position, or correcting facts. Save your defense for a second conversation.

**6. Say it Shorter!** Your partner may avoid conversation because it feels awful to him. Sometimes the culprit is the sheer number of sentences and the intensity in our voice. Slow down your speech, turn down the volume, and make your criticism in three sentences or less.

**7. Sweat the Small Stuff.** When you say you’ll do something, do it! Never assume that your overall contribution to the marriage compensates for failing to do what you say you’ll do, whether it’s picking up your socks or moving the boxes out of the garage by Sunday.

**8. Know Your Bottom Line.** Be flexible in changing for your partner 84% of the time, but don’t sacrifice your core values, beliefs and priorities under relationship pressures.

**9. Be self-focused.** Connect with friends and family, pursue

your interests, and be of service of others. If your primary energy isn't directed to living your own life as well as possible, you'll be over-focused on your partner in a worried or critical way.

**10. Choose happiness over winning the argument.** Your partner's happiness and the tone of your marriage mean a whole more than who is right and who is to blame. Don't lock yourself into negativity at the expense of your happiness and well-being. Step aside from old anger and hurt.

*Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., author of Marriage Rules, is a clinical psychologist whose many acclaimed books have topped six million copies in combined sales. She is a dynamic, sought-after speaker who has appeared on The Oprah Winfrey Show, CNN, and NPR, and she hosts The Dance of Connection blog on [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com).*