



Helen Fisher (left) and Lucy Brown (right) discuss the brain scan data and watch over a participant in the scanner.

Better Loving Through Brain Science

9 Relationship Keys

Here is a list of 9 relationship keys that research in *psychology* has established are important in a partnership. We've expanded on points 5-9 because the brain scanning data also show very directly that these points are important, too.

- 1. Minimize stress.** Sometimes you can't avoid it, but don't blame it on yourself or the other person. It's the situation you're in.
- 2. Have fun with friends and family.** It's worth making the effort to cultivate supportive friend and family relationships, and to do things together.
- 3. Control anxiety.** If you tend to be an anxious or depressed person, seek therapy or ways to reduce your anxiety, like meditation. Too often people blame a partner for problems. It is better to address problems yourself. But:
- 4. Learn communication skills.** This is very important. Yes, there are skills to be learned! It's best if both of you go to a course together.
- 5. Capitalization,** which means celebrate your partner's success.
- 6. Enjoy something new.** Do novel things together about once a week.
- 7. Use positive illusions/allusions.** View your partner in an overall positive light. Emphasize their strengths and positive characteristics such as, mature, understanding, likeable, competent. Accept, don't judge.
- 8. Small Selfless Acts.** Put the other person before yourself sometimes. Give a thoughtful surprise gift that requires your energy.
- 9. Practice Emotional Regulation.** Notice when your emotions are taking over. Take a moment to assess whether your strong emotional response is the best one. Often there is a more effective way to react. This is part of #4: communication skills.



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Here's a closer look at:

5. Capitalization

One of the studies:

Are you happy for me? How sharing positive events with others provides personal and interpersonal benefits

Reis, Harry T.; Smith, Shannon M.; Carmichael, Cheryl L.; Caprariello, Peter A.; Tsai, Fen-Fang; Rodrigues, Amy; Maniaci, Michael R.

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol 99(2), 311-329, 2010.

Summary:

An enthusiastic response to good news makes the news even better. It enhances the value of the good news event. Your enthusiastic response is a reward for the person, and remember, we want to activate the reward system as often as possible in our romantic partner. Also, studies show that an enthusiastic response to good news promotes trust in the other person. Trust is an essential part of a good romantic relationship. Actually all this is good for ANY relationship.

6. Enjoy something new together.

One of the studies:

Couples' Shared Participation in Novel and Arousing Activities and Experienced Relationship quality

Aron, A., Aron, E., Norman, C.C., McKenna, C.

Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol 78 (2), 273-284, 2000.

Summary:

Just a 7-minute novel and arousing task that a couple had to do together made them feel happier about their relationship! The couple had to roll some pillows across a gym floor while their ankles were tied together! Pretty simple. The article carried out several experiments, inside a lab and out in the field, and all the results suggested the same thing: it's good for the relationship if couples do something novel, challenging and arousing together once a week or so.

From the brain mapping studies, we see that romance involves a system that is activated by novelty, too. It also causes arousal. Activating this system by novel experiences seems to act synergistically to increase the romance in a partnership.





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7. Use Positive Illusions—Suspend Negative Judgment

One of the studies:

Regional brain activity during early-stage intense romantic love predicted relationship outcomes after 40 months: An fMRI assessment

Xu, X., Lucy L. Brown, Arthur Aron, Guikang Cao, Tingyong Feng, Bianca Acevedo, Xuchu Weng

Summary:

In Mona Xu's study of people who stayed together in a relationship vs. those who broke up, the brain scans showed that the ability to suspend negative judgment may be a major key to a lasting, satisfying relationship. Thinking positively about your partner supports them, and you. We also found evidence that putting the other person first helps. See the next key, #8.

8. Small Selfless Acts

An article in the Wall Street Journal for Valentine's Day 2013 emphasized the research of Dr. Harry Reis, a psychologist at the University of Rochester:

Small Acts, Big Love

People who put their mates' needs first make themselves happier, too.

"Saying 'I love you' is just words," says Mr. Kline, a 42-year-old engineer from Shoemakersville, Pa. "I like to do things that require effort, planning and a little bit of sacrifice. It shows you are putting the other person first."

Researchers call this 'compassionate love'—recognizing a partner's needs and concerns and putting them ahead of your own. "It's not just making people feel good," says Harry T. Reis, a University of Rochester professor of psychology. "It's a



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way of communicating to the other person that you understand what they are all about and that you appreciate and care for them."

Harry Reis also says, "Put your partner's goals first. Giving your husband the last cupcake is easy. Spending your vacation—again—with his family is hard."

Of course, you don't want to put your partner's goals first ALL the time. YOU need to be with someone who puts your goals first sometimes, too.

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323696404578297942503592524>

9. Practice Emotional Regulation. It's part of communication skills.

One of the studies:

Neural correlates of Marital Satisfaction and Well-being: Reward, Empathy and Affect

Acevedo, B.P., Aron, A., Fisher, H.E., Brown, L.L.

Clinical Neuropsychiatry, vol. 9, 20-31, 2012.

Summary:

For her PhD thesis, Bianca Acevedo studied people who were still "in love" after 10 years of marriage, and asked them about their relationship satisfaction. One part of the brain that was involved with high relationship satisfaction in a long-term love relationship is also involved in emotional regulation and perspective-taking. We think the ability to regulate emotional reactions is probably good for a partnership. We don't want to say it is important to **control** yourself, but to be mindful of how emotional your responses are, and to consider if they are effective, good or bad for your relationship. It can be good to distance yourself for a moment when you're feeling emotional and take another perspective.

Here are links to videos about these keys on our website:

<http://theanatomyoflove.com/video/novelty/>

<http://theanatomyoflove.com/conclusions/the-brains-reward-system-and-early-stage-romantic-love/time-and-romance-conclusions/>