



TABLE FOR TWO

Bitter or Better: **RELATIONSHIP REMINDERS**

By Dr. Linda Miles

My husband Robert and I recently renewed our marriage vows after 33 years with granddaughters Merritt and Bella as Attendants, Robert Wray as best man, and our son, Brett, serving as Minister. Over the years, we have had our share of hardships and challenges. As we learn to repair conflicts, we work on becoming better instead of bitter.

I compiled a list of guiding principles that help us along through inevitable marital conflicts:

1. **Kindness and Respect.** The expression, “we should treat family like strangers and strangers like family,” indicates the amount of disrespect tolerated in relationships. This attitude is a barrier to the basic building blocks of long-term goodwill and respect.
2. **Ability to Learn: Curiosity.** Although it is normal to have disagreements and power struggles, many couples fail to learn from conflicts and may repeat the same self-destructive scenarios and behaviors for decades. We shouldn’t talk unless we can improve on silence. As James Thurber noted, we tend to look back in anger or forward in fear instead of “around in awareness.”
3. **Flexibility.** Many people grew up in rigid families with rigid roles. Consequently, it doesn’t occur to them to let go of patterns that aren’t working.
4. **Ability to Hear Your Pain.** This ability often brings couples into therapy because they have not learned to sit and listen to one another with empathy and compassion.
5. **A Deep Inner Life on a Personal Journey.** Often, couples become too fused together, losing their individual joys and passions.
6. **Similar Passions.** Ability to have many good times together—Many couples lose their pleasure bond with each other, mainly sharing complaints and drudge.



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7. Similar Values. Unfortunately, we read too many “happily ever after” fairy tales instead of understanding the importance of conscious negotiation of rules, roles, religion, and money issues early-on in couplehood.
8. Compassion. Many people learn “shame and blame” games in their families. They engage in rascal hunting and learn to use these behaviors in close relationships. Families fail to watch each other with “soft eyes” (Levine 1995) to address problem behaviors gently without judgment about partners. Often a partner will take the “moral high ground” and lecture the other about perceived inadequacies. Instead of compassion shared between two equals, partners often relate to each other like parents of children.
9. Ability to Laugh at Oneself. Because many people grew up in a shame-blame environment, it isn’t easy to look at themselves lightly.
10. Substance Abuse, Dishonesty, Cover-Up. A lack of knowledge about substance abuse introduces a wild card into relationships. Also, dishonesty and cover-ups erode trust. To maintain lasting love relationships, we need protection and connection.
11. Ability to Be a Friend and Not Just a Lover. Passion without friendship in relationships is like doing somersaults on a circus trapeze without a safety net.
12. Someone Who Makes Your Life Bigger, Not Someone Who Makes Your Life Smaller. Unfortunately, too many people grew up seeing family in terms of correction-city, drudge, and duty. Consequently, they perceive commitment as a prison sentence instead of a shared adventure.

Although this is an easy list to memorize, the difficulty lies in breaking the patterns that prevent our desired behaviors. Peggy Papp, a famous family therapist, remarked that we come out of our own family of origin with a “cookie-cutter” approach to life, and it requires “heroic moments” to change the shape of our cookie-cutters.

Visualize your dream relationship several times a day, which will help to change your cookie-cutter. Focus on who and what you want instead of who and what you don’t want.

Focus On Becoming Better Instead Of Bitter.



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