

# Four Principles of Healthy Relationships

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## Introduction

Relationships are central to our very being—our survival depends on them. The capacity to build and maintain healthy relationships, which support psychological, physical and spiritual growth, is the single most important requirement for happiness, success, and fulfillment. Life provides opportunities for a network of multiple relationships; however, we often lack the knowledge and understanding to meet the challenges posed by relating to each other well. Human beings are monumentally complex. They are unpredictable, fragile, imperfect, incomplete, and yet special and unique, a wonderful mystery. Relationships are an on-going process of give and take, but not all giving and taking is equally effective. Not all relationships are right and not all relationships are healthy.

The ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships is difficult. First we have to confront our own demons; adversity can leave lasting scars that ravage one's ability and willingness to give. Many people are chronologically mature, but struggle with internal barriers that keep them emotionally immature. Another challenge is that our society has not only become indifferent to relationships, but absolutely hostile to them. In our compulsive, never ending pursuit of ways to do more things faster and efficiently, we don't have time for each other. We are technologically sophisticated, but emotionally impoverished. Cities with swollen populations have become the breeding ground for isolation, loneliness, alienation, and emptiness. Relationships are the poor stepchild to our consuming desire for status, power, money and material possessions; so if you want to place a higher priority on relationships, you're going to have to fight for it. Some differences between the characteristics of current society and healthy relationships are listed in Table 1:

**Table 1: Characteristics of Current Society and Healthy Relationships**

<b>Characteristics of Current Society</b>	<b>Characteristics of Healthy Relationships</b>
Valuing wealth and material possessions	Valuing people
People as means to an end	People as ends in themselves
Task and activity focused	Relationship-focused
Speeding up, doing more faster	Slowing down, taking time
Emotional distance	Emotional closeness
Brief, superficial dialogue	Deep, meaningful dialogue
Telephone, email time	Face-to-face time
Hedging one's bets	Making commitments
Competition	Cooperation
Taking (self-focused)	Giving (other-focused)
Being served	Serving
I don't matter	I matter

## Principles of Healthy Relationships

Are there some basic principles which underlie the characteristics of healthy relationships? While many books have been written on the subject, an empirically-derived set of four principles has emerged from research with the Prisoner's Dilemma, a non-zero-sum game used to study interactions with formalized incentive structures. The classical Prisoner's Dilemma is as follows:

The police have insufficient evidence to convict two prisoners, and separately offer them the same deal: if one testifies against the other and the other remains silent, the betrayer goes free and the silent accomplice receives the full 10-year sentence. If both stay silent, the police can sentence the prisoners to only six months in jail for a minor charge. If each betrays the other, each will receive a two-year sentence. Each prisoner must make the choice of whether to betray the other prisoner or to remain silent. However, neither prisoner knows for sure what choice the other prisoner will make.

The dilemma is summarized in Table 2 as follows:

**Table 2: Prisoner's Dilemma**

	<b>Prisoner B Stays Silent</b>	<b>Prisoner B Betrays</b>
<b>Prisoner A Stays Silent</b>	Both serve six months	Prisoner A serves ten years Prisoner B goes free
<b>Prisoner A Betrays</b>	Prisoner A goes free Prisoner B serves ten years	Both serve two years

The players have two possible strategies (cooperate and betray) and four possible outcomes, two with equal payoffs and two with unequal payoffs. The gain for mutual cooperation is deliberately kept smaller than the gain for one-sided betrayal, so there is always a temptation to betray. Therefore, if both players try to get the highest possible individual payoff, the result is mutual betrayal. If players offer reciprocity, however, the result is mutual cooperation because the outcome is more profitable than mutual betrayal.

Game theory and evolutionary biology predict that both players will strive to maximize their individual payoff. Thus they will betray each other even though the individual reward for each player would be greater if they both cooperated. In the *iterated prisoner's dilemma* the game is played repeatedly, so each player has an opportunity to "punish" the other for previous non-cooperative play. The incentive to betray is overcome by the threat of punishment, and cooperation may become what's known as a Nash equilibrium (named after mathematician John Nash), where no player has anything to gain by changing his/her own strategy. People learn quickly that cooperation leads to mutual advantage, even if it does not produce the maximum outcome for any one participant. Nevertheless, betrayal by both players always remains as a possibility.

Robert Axelrod (1981) was interested in finding a winning strategy for repeated Prisoner Dilemma games. He conducted two computer tournaments, both of which were won by a strategy called Tit for Tat, submitted by Anatol Rapoport. Tit for Tat, which was the simplest of all the strategies submitted, had only two rules: On the first move cooperate, and on each succeeding move do what your opponent did the previous move. Thus, Tit for Tat is a cooperative strategy based on reciprocity. A slightly better strategy was "Tit for Tat with Forgiveness."

When the opponent betrays, on the next move, the player sometimes cooperates anyway. This allows for occasional recovery from a continuous cycle of betrayal.

After analyzing the 3,000,000 choices made in the second tournament, Axelrod concluded that Tit for Tat is successful because it is “nice” (it’s never the first to betray), “provokable” (it responds by betraying in response to betrayal), “forgiving” (it returns to cooperation if the other person does), and “non-envious” (it doesn’t try to score more than the other person). He concluded that selfish individuals for their own selfish good will tend to be nice and forgiving and non-envious. Here is an overview of the four principles of relationships which came out of the Prisoner Dilemma. These may sound simple, but the headlines on any particular day reveal that we aren’t anywhere close to getting these right.

**1. Establish trust**

Trust can be defined as believing another person has your best interests at heart, whereas mistrust can be defined as believing that the other person doesn’t have your best interests at heart (Hultman, 1998). Trust is needed to guard against the diminished capacity for giving that stems from suspicion and cynicism. Mistrust is a feeling the other person is trying to control or manipulate you to their end, rather than sharing control to accomplish some joint end. Mistrust is contagious, and can erode the health of teams, organizations, and nations (see Hultman, 2004). Trust has to do with having faith in a relationship. It is a dynamic variable that fluctuates up or down, depending on how we interpret another person’s behavior. Thus, it’s possible to trust someone to a greater extent one minute and less the next. We make adjustments like this on a conscious or unconscious level all the time as we interact with other people.

Trust is an *output* that depends on certain *inputs*. In deciding whether or not to trust a person (the output), we evaluate his or her behavior according to its consistency and sincerity (the inputs). Consistency has to do with whether or not the other person is ethical, reliable, and dependable. The question we ask ourselves here is, “Can I count on this person to do the right thing?” Sincerity has to do with whether or not the other person is genuine and non-manipulative. The question we ask ourselves here is, “Can I count on this person to be really concerned about me?” Consistency focuses on the predictability of the other person’s observable behavior. Sincerity focuses on the other person’s motives, which again can’t be directly observed but must be inferred from their verbal and non-verbal behavior. Trust demands both consistency and sincerity; one without the other won’t do. We not only need to believe the other person will do the right thing, but will do it for the right reasons. The good thing the person is doing now can’t be a set up for some bad thing that will happen later. Table 3 summarizes the effects of high and low levels of consistency and sincerity on trust.

**Table 3: Inputs for Trust**

	<b>High Consistency</b>	<b>Low Consistency</b>
<b>High Sincerity</b>	High Trust	Mixed Message
<b>Low Sincerity</b>	Mixed Message	Low Trust

The condition of high consistency and high sincerity leads to trust, whereas the condition of low consistency and low sincerity leads to mistrust. The conditions of being consistent and insincere (“He’s doing his job but doesn’t really care about us”) and being inconsistent and sincere (“She means well but doesn’t follow through”) send mixed messages that undermine trust.

Trust is such a crucial issue because we’re aware that other people are capable of hurting us physically, psychologically, emotionally, and financially. Relationships with other people

always involve risk, and we're careful not to take risks unless we believe it's safe to do so. Our behavior will vary tremendously depending on whether or not we trust the other person. Some of these differences are depicted in Table 4. In the Trust Pattern people are willing to make themselves vulnerable to another person, because they believe it's safe to do so. In the Mistrust Pattern, however, people spend their time protecting themselves from perceived threat. When people are in this mode, often they react in ways that cause others to mistrust them, creating a vicious cycle.

**Table 4: Patterns of Trust and Mistrust**

Trust Pattern	Mistrust Pattern
<p style="text-align: center;">Perception that the other person's behavior is consistent and sincere</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Conclusion that it's safe to trust</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Confidence</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Willingness to take risks</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Perception that the other person's behavior is inconsistent and/or insincere</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Conclusion that it's <b>not</b> safe to trust</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Fear</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↙                      ↘</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fight</b> (Attack to deal with perceived danger)                      <b>Flight</b> (Escape or avoid perceived danger)</p>

As in Tit for Tat, the person initiating the first move starts by offering to choose to cooperate with the expectation that the other person will reciprocate. This means that you must present yourself as someone who is both trustworthy and prepared to trust others. You have control over both of these requirements. You don't have control over whether the other person proves trustworthy, but you can decide when it's prudent to trust.

If people do not trust you, then you need to examine your behavior and be prepared to make changes. If you do not trust others, you need to increase your willingness to trust. Some people speak passionately about having been burned in the past and now they do not trust anyone. They are suspicious of new people because of what others did or didn't do. While they might make a compelling case, refusing to trust others is not a workable approach. It leaves people isolated and imprisoned by their issues. It diminishes productivity and morale. Cooperation based on trust is not optional—it is mandatory. Some trust-busters are listed in table 5.

**2. If trust is violated, hold the person accountable**

If trust is ever violated then sustaining a healthy relationship requires that there be accountability. Recall that in the iterated prisoner's dilemma, cooperation becomes more prevalent when players have the opportunity to punish a partner who betrays. In this way punishment serves as a buffer against exploitation. Axelrod (1981) refers to this as the "shadow of the future." Retaliation has to do with the concept of justice, which can be defined as a standard of rightness. While there are several different kinds of justice, the kind that is most relevant here is *retributive justice*, which concerns the extent to which punishments are fair. Retaliating when betrayed is retributive justice, which plays a key role in the maintenance of social order.

The term *moral reciprocity* refers to the tendency of people to reciprocate both assistance and harm in relation to the subjective interpretation of acts as being moral or immoral. Evolutionary theory holds that rational individuals will only engage in actions that maximize their own gains, but people are often willing to pay a price considered to be irrationally large to punish

others they believe have acted immorally. When people feel cheated, they often become indignant and respond out of righteous indignation, even at the risk of great personal loss including prison terms and death. Some researchers explain this by asserting that humans have developed an innate sense of fairness (see, for example, Fon & Parist, 2002).

Becker (1986) argues that we should make reciprocity a moral obligation governed by the following maxims:

1. Good received should be returned with good.
2. Evil received should not be returned with evil.
3. Evil received should be resisted.
4. Evil done should be made good.

**Table 5: Trust-Busters**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lying</li><li>• Tell half-truths</li><li>• Make false accusations</li><li>• Say one thing but do another</li><li>• Say one thing to one person, something else to another</li><li>• Fail to honor agreements</li><li>• Betray other's confidence</li><li>• Find fault with others</li><li>• Blame others for mistakes</li><li>• Make excuses for mistakes</li><li>• Withhold information</li><li>• Gossip about others</li><li>• Play politics</li><li>• Use manipulative tactics</li><li>• Put others down</li><li>• Have hidden agendas</li><li>• Compete rather than cooperate</li><li>• Seek revenge</li><li>• Criticize others</li><li>• Have a "we-they" mentality</li><li>• Openly attack others</li><li>• Try to intimidate others</li><li>• Focus on the negative</li><li>• Ignore input from others</li><li>• Distort what others say</li><li>• Use threats and ultimatums</li><li>• Make decisions affecting others without involving them</li><li>• Gloat over other's hardship.</li><li>• Prejudge people who are different</li><li>• Embarrass people around others</li></ul>
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According to this formulation, we should avoid retaliation and instead resist evil. So, how do we insure justice and deal with cheaters? This can be accomplished through the principle of accountability, which means being assertive and confronting people who try to take advantage of you. Healthy relationships always require the balancing mechanism of accountability. In organizations, accountability also means having one set of standards that apply to everyone. The

fastest ways to increase complaints and lower morale is to have what employees perceive to be a dual set of standards. Some accountability-busters are listed in Table 6.

**Table 6: Accountability-Busters**

- Fail to be assertive
- Fail to stand up for yourself
- Fail to set personal boundaries
- Fail to clarify expectations
- Pretend things are “OK” when they aren’t
- Keep your real feelings to yourself
- Tolerate unacceptable behavior
- Give-in to unreasonable demands
- Back down when intimidated
- Act like a “push-over”
- Offer forgiveness without requiring change
- Say yes when you mean no

### **3. Offer forgiveness with mercy**

In addition to trust and accountability, healthy relationships require forgiveness with mercy. Many people carry grudges, but grudges have an extremely negative impact on relationships. Recall that the most effective strategy in Axelrod’s tournament was Tit for Tat with Forgiveness. This means that when your opponent betrays, on the next move you cooperate anyway, in an effort to avoid the suboptimal results reaped by an endless cycle of mutual betrayals. *Forgiveness* can be defined as the mental and/or spiritual process of ceasing to feel resentment or anger toward someone else for a perceived offense, mistake, or ceasing to demand punishment or restitution. Forgiveness may be considered simply in terms of the feelings of the person who forgives, or in terms of the relationship between the forgiver and the person forgiven. In some contexts, it may be granted without any expectation of compensation, and without any response on the part of the offender (for example, one may forgive a person who is dead). In many cases, it may be necessary for the offender to offer some form of apology or restitution, in order to quiet their inner sense of guilt.

Now the goal in relationships is not simply to let go of resentment but to restore cooperation. Saying “I forgive you, but I’ll never trust you again,” isn’t workable because it blocks the resumption of cooperative acts. Thus, in order for cooperation to be restored following betrayal, the cheated person needs to give the betrayer another chance. We refer to this as offering *mercy*. Following the extension of mercy, the ball’s in the betrayer’s court: if the betrayer “repents” and returns a favor, cooperation can be restored; if the betrayer continues to cheat, however, you avoid exploitation by retaliation. In ordinary life this means holding the person accountable, which sometimes means leaving the relationship. Table 7 presents four relationship patterns, based on various combinations of accountability and forgiveness.

Pattern A, characterized by mutual accountability and forgiveness, is a healthy relationship because the two people consider each other’s needs to be equally important. Both people are willing to take responsibility for their actions, instead of blaming each other or rationalizing. They confront each other openly and honestly when problems develop, but also offer forgiveness when mistakes are acknowledged. Since they understand that confrontations are intended to make the relationship better, the two people respond to them non-defensively. The relationship emphasizes a combination of justice and mercy.

**Table 7: Relationship Patterns**

	<b>High Accountability</b>	<b>Low Accountability</b>
<b>High Forgiveness</b>	<b>(A)</b> <b>Healthy</b> <b>Relationship</b>	<b>(B)</b> <b>Codependent</b> <b>Relationship</b>
<b>Low Forgiveness</b>	<b>(C)</b> <b>Abusive</b> <b>Relationship</b>	<b>(D)</b> <b>No Basis For</b> <b>a Relationship</b>

In Pattern B, the codependent relationship, one person is willing to forgive but is reluctant to hold the other person accountable for unacceptable behavior, often due to fear of rejection. Codependent people struggle with feelings of unworthiness. They don't believe that anyone would love them just for themselves, but that they must strive to get love and then to keep it. Consequently, the codependent person acts as though his or her needs are less important than the other person's needs—that they're less worthy. A codependent person emphasizes mercy without justice.

In Pattern C, the abusive relationship, one person holds the other one accountable but is unwilling to forgive. In this type of relationship, the concept of accountability is distorted: abusive people use accountability as a weapon to intimidate and control others. Abusive people concentrate selfishly on getting their own needs met, even if it's at another person's expense. They feel justified in punishing people who don't meet their needs. Victims often remain in abusive relationships due to fear of retaliation. Frequently, a codependent person ends up in a relationship with an abusive person. These relationships are often enduring, though unhealthy, because the codependent person keeps forgiving the abuser. The codependent person tolerates unacceptable behavior, in order to keep the peace and maintain the relationship. In the balance of power, an abusive person emphasizes justice without mercy.

In pattern D no basis for a relationship exists, because neither accountability nor forgiveness is offered. No justice plus no mercy equals no relationship. Table 8 lists some forgiveness-busters that can destroy relationships.

**Table 8: Forgiveness-Busters**

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|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blame others for your mistakes</li> <li>• Take a self-righteous stance</li> <li>• Keep a chip on your shoulder</li> <li>• Fail to seek forgiveness</li> <li>• Focus on people's mistakes</li> <li>• Play up other's mistakes, while down-playing your own</li> <li>• Refuse to accept apologies</li> <li>• Harbor resentment</li> <li>• Be vindictive</li> <li>• Berate other's character</li> <li>• Forgive but don't forget</li> <li>• Use the past as a weapon</li> <li>• Use forgiveness as a bargaining chip</li> </ul> |
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#### 4. Strive for balanced exchanges

The fourth principle has to do with working toward balanced exchanges or fairness. People often use the terms justice and fairness interchangeably. In the context of this paper, however, justice is a standard of rightness, while fairness is impartial application of that standard. Fairness is demonstrated in one's willingness to cooperate by sharing rewards. A transaction can be defined as exploitative if it is unfair. To maintain the cooperative scheme in games like the Prisoner's Dilemma, both players must refrain from seeking to maximize individual payoffs.

Fairness is a goal of all conflict resolution efforts—fairness in both the outcomes reached and the procedures employed to reach them (Moore, 1986). Outcomes are regarded as fair when they reflect what is properly due or merited (Rescher, 2002). People will often accept outcomes that aren't entirely satisfactory if the procedures followed are seen as fair: if, for example, they feel they had adequate opportunity to speak their piece, feel they were actually heard, feel they had some part in shaping the outcomes, and feel that the third party (if any) acted impartially (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Thus, the perception of balanced exchanges is necessary to maintain harmonious relationships. When exchanges are perceived to be imbalanced, people become resentful and antagonistic; accountability and forgiveness are then required to restore trust and cooperation. Some examples of fairness-busters are given in Table 9.

**Table 9: Fairness-Busters**

- Try to “win” at all cost
- Seek “win-lose” outcomes
- View others as a means to one's own ends
- Play up your contribution
- Play down other's contribution
- Undercut others
- Go behind people's backs
- Use power-plays
- Make others look bad
- Try to turn people against others
- Take sides
- Bend or exploit the rules
- Look for loop-holes
- Try to justify cheating
- Fail to bargain in good faith
- Give others less than they deserve

## Conclusion

Relationships are crucial to happiness and fulfillment in life, but establishing and maintaining healthy relationships is difficult in our fast-paced, task-oriented society. Healthy relationships are possible if they're based on four fundamental principles: trust, accountability, forgiveness with mercy, and fairness. In a very real sense trust is the overarching principle, because trust isn't possible without accountability, mercy, and fairness. These principles can never be mastered completely, but represent essential elements in an on-going process of interpersonal growth and development.

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