



# Relationship Rules

By Denise King Gillingham, LMSW, ACC, CPM

**M**erriam-Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary* defines *relationship* as "the state of being related or interrelated." We live in relationship with many things: family of origin, environment, our bodies—the list goes on. Within each larger relationship group—family, for example—we have many other types of relationships. You might be a daughter, mother, sister, aunt, cousin, and mother-in-law simultaneously. Understanding who we are in each of these alliances and being aware of the roles we play helps us have more-satisfying, fulfilling interactions.

Use the following 10 rules to boost your level of relationship satisfaction.

**1** **Remember that everyone seeks validation.** In her commencement address to the Harvard class of 2013, Oprah Winfrey said that the common thread in all 35,000 interviews she has conducted (including celebri-

ties, presidents, and heads of state) was that they all asked "Was I okay?" at the end of the interview. Validate someone today!

**2** **Be kind to yourself and others.** Resist the temptation to say something sharp. Instead ask yourself these two questions: *How will what I am about to say help me?* and *How will this help my relationship with others?* If you can't answer those questions, remember what your mother told you: "If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything!"

On a more introspective level, try to express the sarcasm or sharp words in a sentence that comes from your heart. For example, instead of saying, "They are so stupid," you might say, "They hurt my feelings by excluding me." In the second example, you are expressing your feelings. Others will understand what you are saying. Sarcasm masks emotions and makes it more difficult for people to know what you want.

**3** **Ask a question and then wait for the answer.** Everyone wants to feel heard. Practice listening. You will learn about yourself and others.

**4** **Look for the positive.** Catch someone doing something good. Often we listen for the negative or have negative expectations and jump to incorrect conclusions. If you want someone to change a behavior, catch the person doing the behavior you would like to see—and then acknowledge and celebrate the desired behavior!

**5** **Stand in the shoes of the other person.** Think about a small problem you are having in a relationship. Write down the problem from your perspective. Now get up and sit in another chair. Write down the problem from the other person's point of view. Really try to get into their shoes. What did you learn about yourself? What did

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you learn about the other person? How will this influence your relationship?

**6** *Listen for the wisdom in your relationship.* Look at your relationship as an entity. Think of the Rolling Stones. The group consists of Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Ronnie Wood, and Brian Jones—four individuals. They are not four individuals when they are all together. They are the Rolling Stones. Every relationship has a third entity. Here is another way to understand this concept: Think of a helicopter flying over an area. The pilot sees the whole picture—the geography of the land, buildings, lakes, parks, and roads. The extra information that the pilot has because he can see the whole picture gives him wisdom about the land. What wisdom does taking a bird's-eye view of your relationship have to offer to you? Examples of this include: each of you needs to not be so hard on the other; by being a little more flexible, you will be able to give each other what you want. Or maybe it is to focus on the things you do well together. Find your wisdom!

**7** *Be aware of your values and make decisions that are in sync with them.* Peer pressure is not just for teens. Everyone wants to be validated, and sometimes we unwittingly bend our values for this purpose. You know that telltale feeling in your stomach that

tells you something is not working right? Listen to it! You have neurons in your stomach. Your gut reaction is your emotions informing you. Take a moment to check in with your core values at those times!

**8** *Count to 10 and breathe.* Counting to 10 (or to 100 if you're really angry) distracts you from what is making you angry—and it's good for your brain! Breathing helps to simultaneously relax and distract you.

**9** *Be objective.* When you look through a blue lens or a red one, everything is blue or red. Now step away and look through a clear lens. What do you see now? Try this idea with a relationship in which you are experiencing mild conflict and see if it yields any new information.

**10** *Figure out who you are and how you want to be in the relationship.* We have roles—both stated and unstated—in relationships. Your stated role may be mother, and your unstated role might be driver or party planner. Understanding these roles helps you clarify how you operate within your particular system and what others expect from you. What are your stated and unstated roles?

What are your relationship rules? ❁



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