



Did You Know?



FAMILY SERVICES NEWSLETTER

Mandala Children's House • Anne Kangas, L.C.S.W.



Rules for Staying in Love

Love and Relationships

At Mandala, we talk a lot about the importance of relationships. Children desperately NEED healthy relationships to thrive. We work hard to build them in the classroom and with each other in our school environment. All human beings are wired for *connection*, and without that connection, they wither and die. Unfortunately, building relationship doesn't just happen. It takes what we call "intention."

Do you know the best gift you can give your child? A good, solid, healthy relationship with your partner. In your partnership, you are demonstrating to your child just how relationships work—or don't work. Your child is learning from you in every moment, in every word and every look and every subtle response. What your child sees is creating an internal blueprint for what to look for later in adult relationships. Children repeat what they have seen, *not* what they have been told. Your child learns the "dance steps" from you, and relationship is all about the dance.

Keeping relationships alive and healthy is an ongoing task. For most couples, good intentions and "love" aren't enough. It takes commitment and action to keep that love growing through the years. Here are some "rules" that couples therapists have found to be critical to enhancing your understanding and working out of your relationships. These are drawn from the book, *Women Men Love*, by Drs. Connell Cowan and Melvin Kinder.

Rule #1 ♥ Relationships Don't Just Happen - We Create Them

Most of us grow up believing in the "magic of Love," and when we fall in love it is something that just seems to happen. The truth of the matter is that good relationships don't just continue to happen on their own; they are the result of conscious effort and work. The course of a relationship is never determined by luck or fate. It is the result of our ongoing decisions and actions. Each partner is responsible. Sometimes we get lazy along the way and become less sensitive about the impact of our actions. Yet relationships are never static. They are either *growing* or in some subtle form of *decline*. When you are aware that the course of love is up to you, you can take on the power to shape your destiny. Rather than being a passive participant or "victim," you can make changes happen. Remember, if one person changes, change happens! Relationships are a dance. If you change a step, the other person changes in response.

Rule #2 ♥ Love May Be Dormant - But It Never Dies

Because divorce is so common, we often fear that love will wither and die. People become convinced that they can fall out of love as easily as they fall into it. Yet love rarely dies. When love seems absent in a relationship, it's because something else is masking it, like negative feelings eclipsing the positive ones. When we are angry or frustrated, we allow these feelings to predominate over love. (In the case of divorce, people make sure there are no embers glowing in order to feel at peace with their decision.) Emotional numbness can become a way of defending ourselves against the risk of caring again. When bad things happen in a marriage, we feel a need to pull in and protect ourselves. We feel as though love has died. But it hasn't really. It can be revived. But the sources of anger and sadness need to be identified. There needs to be room for a full expression of feelings, followed by forgiveness and acceptance. Remembering the love and good feelings we once felt, and retrieving those memories of caring and desire, can motivate us to do what is necessary to build on our relationship again.

Rule #3 ♥ A Mate Is Not A Solution

At some time or another, we can all fall into the trap of thinking that a wonderful love relationship will "heal what ails us." The rewards of a relationship are so highly praised in our culture today, that we become convinced that love can make us feel good, heal our insecurities, validate our "not-OK ness"...even heal old wounds. Yes, love is a special connection, but it is not a solution to our internal problems. We still bring an individual self to the couple relationship. If that self is doubtful or plagued with past wounds, we may feel disappointed that our loved one does not make us feel better and we can feel resentment at being let-down. What a lot of power we can give the other person! No one can live up to this expectation. Ultimately, we must first learn to love ourselves (and deal with our past hurts and issues), or we will never feel truly worthy or be able to love another.

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Rule #4 ♥ Love Is About Acceptance, Not Change

All too often, if we are REALLY honest with ourselves, we believe marriage gives us license to "smooth out the rough spots" in the person we love. While it is important to air complaints and dissatisfactions, many of us go too far, and we think we can remake our mate's personality. But it won't work. True, many issues can be brought to the bargaining table and negotiated, but some flaws and shortcomings need to be accepted. What is frustrating is that many of the "differences" we were first attracted to in our partner, now become irritating and threatening. We typically begin to experience those differences as a rejection or negation of who we are. The reality is that love is about accepting someone's flaws and cherishing that which is special and lovable. Even when it seems justifiable to us to try to change our partner "for the better," the other person can feel diminished or put down. And then resistance follows. People change because they *want* to, and this springs from a sense of being loved and accepted.

Rule #5 ♥ Lovers Are Not Mind Readers

One of the fantasies of love is that our mate knows us in a way that we have never been known before and is tuned into our innermost thoughts. Particularly at the beginning of a relationship, we feel an alikeness that some describe as being like "soulmates." What a letdown, then, when our mate doesn't anticipate what we think or feel. We feel disappointed, even betrayed. Sadly, our mate is never a mind reader (much as we might wish for it!). We are responsible for making ourselves known to those we

love! People who need to be understood but do not make an attempt to make that happen are only setting themselves up to feel like victims. When you tell your partner *what* you need and your partner responds, this is REAL love. Expecting your partner to anticipate what you want is a fantasy. We need to actively work to let our partner know what we feel and need. This requires active communication--not a passive waiting for the other person to magically read our minds and know what we want. Again, we are in charge. We hold the power to getting what we need and making good things happen for ourselves in our love relationships.

Rule #6 ♥ *It's Not What You Say, It's What You Do*

Communication IS the key to good relationships. But sometimes people talk too much--they say one thing, while really meaning another, or they say things to each other for reasons other than to impart information or express feelings. Often, communication is used to manipulate, induce guilt, or place blame--even though it's presented as positive and loving. Communication can even be a weapon, a subtle form of coercion, used for the goal of changing the other person. Actions speak louder than words. Words convey intentions, but how we back up our words is what ultimately has an impact. If you wish to have an alive and caring relationship, it is best to communicate that by acts of loving, caring, and sensitivity. Asking yourself what YOU have done lately for your partner is better than telling that person what you would like to do or what you want the person to do for you!



*What have I done
for my partner
today?*

Rule #7 ♥ *Stable Relationships Are Always Changing*

It's too bad that most of us believe (on an emotional level) that change is dangerous and should be avoided. We learn that stability grows out of constancy and permanence. For this reason, we can find change in a relationship threatening. When we encounter difficulties in our relationship, we resist changing for fear that love is not strong enough to handle and withstand the unpredictability of change. The truth is that relationships are always changing! It's really the capacity to deal with

change in a positive manner that is basic to a strong and healthy relationship. Enduring relationships have flexibility, the ability to greet change not with fear, but with acceptance and a positive attitude. Can we take a chance and assume that love is strong enough to handle our growth--and give our partner the same room to grow? Change can be a wonderful antidote to the moments of boredom and staleness that occur in any long-term relationship. A marriage is forever evolving, just as we as individuals are always growing and changing. Children bring their own changes to a relationship too. Having "bad times" doesn't mean the relationship is bad or seriously troubled. All good relationships have occasional difficult times. Remember that these bad times don't mean the relationship is lacking. Rather, they signal that we must address some new change in a positive and flexible way.

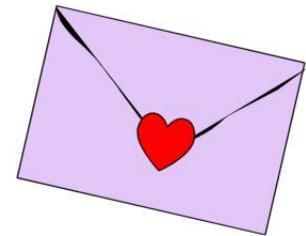
Rule #8 ♥ *Love Is Always Poisoned By Infidelity*

Sadly, with the climate of the times, we have become increasingly accustomed to infidelity as affairs become more commonplace for both men and women. People have been lulled into thinking that infidelity may even be relatively benign. We hear that "affairs may even be good for a relationship." The truth is that even though infidelity doesn't lead to divorce as frequently as it did in the past, it does permanently change the bond of love. An affair is not a solution, it is a symptom of a problem. Partners who are unfaithful are attempting to resolve internal dilemmas by seeking momentary refuge in another person. Even if it "feels good" or "feels right" or if the other person "never needs to know," something destructive has happened that cannot be undone even if the other person never finds out. There has been a violation of one's commitment, which has profound implications. When we respect and honor

our marital commitment, we feel comfortable and at peace with ourselves. We don't have to hide anything. Deception destroys us. We secretly know we are dishonest and feel devoid of honor and character. Honor and loyalty are critical to any strong loving relationship. They aren't just empty words. Loyalty is something to be practiced, otherwise love is weakened and trust diminished. Although we see these values as "traditional", they evolved over time to protect love-sustaining relationships.

Rule #9 ♥ *Blame Is Irresponsible*

When we are alone, we don't have someone specific to pin our disappointments and frustrations upon. If we feel good, we know it is our own doing. If we feel bad, we suspect the reasons will ultimately lead back to ourselves. But marriage changes all that. When marital bliss soon transforms into marital dissatisfaction and we find it doesn't meet all our needs, there is the perfect breeding-ground for blame and accusation. Now our lament becomes "If I'm unhappy, it's because of YOU!" Our partners are our most convenient scapegoats! (Next come our children.) It's much more painful to come to grips with what "we" may be doing. It's always easier to hurl an accusation, to blame someone else for our misery, than to assume responsibility for our own state of being. Remember: blame is always self-defeating. It reinforces our passivity and makes us feel victimized and at the mercy of another person. Blame always couches some sort of change we want to have happen. But it always makes the fulfillment of our wish *contingent* upon someone else's actions. Blame simply does not work. Assume a more positive posture. Be clear and specific about what you want. The more personal responsibility WE take for the quality of our lives, the less we need to blame others and the happier we feel.



Rule #10 ♥ *Giving Is Contagious*

The 1960's taught us to appreciate and get in touch with our feelings. This was the "me" generation, a time of self-focus that often set personal happiness at the center of the love relationship. While we are gradually moving away from an era where marriages were casually discarded, what still persists is a focus on personal gratification. While meeting one's own needs is important, staying in love takes more than that. Real love requires putting our own needs on hold sometimes--and responding to the needs of our mate. Not always, not unilaterally, but sometimes. Giving to our mate is the one act that connects us directly to the very heart of love. Believe it or not, people FEEL more "in love" when they are actively giving to their partner. And giving is contagious! It models generosity and concern. It encourages reciprocity. A good rule of thumb: give 70 percent and demand 30.

Rule #11 ♥ *Love Doesn't Punish, It Forgives*

Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone hurts and disappoints his or her mate at times. And one of two things can happen: we can develop the capacity to forgive and go on, or we can keep on accumulating resentment. And we all know that resentment can erode relationships! First, it's important to learn how to forgive ourselves. It is not excusing our actions, it's realizing we're not perfect. It's letting go of what we've done to hurt our partner. Second, it's critical to learn to forgive our mate. The wish to hurt and retaliate is normal, but ultimately (after the anger has cooled), the final step in restoring love and harmony is forgiveness. Forgiving unblocks love. No matter how "right" you may be, you can't love again in a positive way until you CHOOSE to forgive. Yes, forgiveness is an intentional act that is a choice. It is not simply the words one says. Forgiving is not excusing or forgetting. Forgiving is getting to the point where we are willing to let go of our painful negative feelings so that the relationship can move on in a warm and loving way.

Source: *Women Men Love, Women Men Leave*, Connell Cowan and Melvin Kinder.



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Mandala Children's House | 5038 Hyland Avenue San Jose, CA 95127 | 408.251.8633 | www.mandalachildrenshouse.com