



# Room FOR TWO



In an exclusive extract from his new book, psychologist John Aiken reveals the top 10 relationship pitfalls – and how to banish them

**T**hroughout my time as a practising psychologist, I have frequently come across a common problem. Time and time again, people tell me that they feel disillusioned and unhappy about their relationships because they've given up their own needs to focus on keeping their partner happy. In short, they've put others first – and themselves last.

We can all experience difficulties meeting our needs in relationships at times. Some people have *never* been able to have a rewarding relationship.

It's a problem that reduces many of us to feelings of intense frustration,

heartache and loneliness. People who tend to lose themselves in relationships often fall into the same traps.

You might think that what you are doing will keep your partner happy, but ultimately you will push them away, and in the long run you'll end up being hurt.

Do you recognise yourself in any of these common relationship pitfalls?

## 1 PUTTING YOUR NEEDS LAST

When you give yourself up in relationships you'll be a specialist at neglecting your own needs. To begin with, you'll struggle even to identify what it is you

want. And if you *can* highlight some of your needs, you'll have great problems taking action on any of them. Instead, you'll focus on your partner. You'll be acutely aware of what's best for them and how to measure up to their expectations.

## 2 AVOIDING CONFLICT

You try to avoid conflict at all costs. You'll fear getting off-side with your partner and you'll be uncomfortable with arguments, intense emotions and negative outcomes. Conflict might result in violence, verbal insults or being beaten down in an intellectual battle. It might end in criticism,

## 8 EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION

You tend to struggle to express your feelings. Instead, you'll bottle them up and suffer in silence. This is a way of keeping up appearances and gives the impression that you're coping. During these times, you'll often use neutral words like 'fine', 'not bad', 'all right', 'okay' and 'good' to describe how you're doing. This has the benefit of keeping people at arm's length and sending out a message that all is well in your world. Unfortunately, underneath you'll have a number of feelings that start to interfere with your life. As time moves on, these emotions start to come to the surface and create problems for you and your partner.



You have a strong tendency to try to be perfect. You see all your behaviour as being a direct reflection of your self-worth. You make sure everything's planned, in its place

You're acutely aware of what they think and you strive to get on with them at all costs.

## 5 SEEKING ADVICE & REASSURANCE

You'll notice that you may constantly ask your partner for advice and reassurance. This allows you to avoid being blamed for mistakes. You'll also typically use this advice as a way of reducing the likelihood of bad outcomes occurring.

## 6 PROCRASTINATING

You tend to spend a lot of time procrastinating and avoiding making decisions. You'll often stall and have difficulties creating momentum in your relationship. This allows you to avoid making the wrong decision, being self-responsible or exposing yourself to negative consequences.

## 7 MEASURING YOURSELF

You'll often compare yourself with others. You'll rate your relationship against those of other couples and try extremely hard to measure up. If you can outdo other couples, then you'll feel happy about yourself and your relationship.

## 9 OVER THINKING

When you lose yourself in a relationship, you'll typically notice that you'll spend most of your time living inside your head. You'll tend to be self-consumed and have great difficulties looking at the bigger picture. You'll tend to be acutely aware of the consequences that impact on you and your relationship. You'll constantly analyse the various interactions and behaviours in your relationship and worry about issues such as breaking up, sexual incompatibility, frequency of arguments, loss of freedom, and difficulties getting on with friends. You'll find the whole process exhausting and that it prevents you from getting close to your partner.

## 10 SELF-SABOTAGE

When you give yourself up in relationships, it's very common for you to start to engage in self-sabotage. Essentially, you hit a crossroads where you realise your relationship won't ever meet your needs and there's little chance of change. When this occurs, you'll often begin to destroy the lifestyle you've created. Some of the most destructive forms include alcohol and drug use, overspending, sexual promiscuity, excessive exercise and comfort eating. ➤

failure, disapproval, loss or rejection.

## 3 PERFECTIONISM

You have a strong tendency to try to be perfect. You see all your behaviour as being a direct reflection of your self-worth. As a result, you make sure everything's planned, organised and in its place, hoping this will allow you to avoid mistakes and receive acceptance.

## 4 STRIVING TO BE LIKED

You're driven by a huge need to be liked. You'll attempt to get on with your partner in a way that doesn't upset them.

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# HOW TO DITCH YOUR BAD HABITS

It takes great courage to break free of old patterns. However, it's important to make it clear that nothing changes if you do nothing. To break old habits, you need to walk the walk. Action is the only way to do this.

If you really want to experience love, you need to start putting yourself first.

To break the pattern of neglecting your own needs, you need to learn the four pillars of wellbeing. Once you have these in place, you can get the relationship you want.

Remember – you first, then love. These four pillars must be kept in place for the rest of your life so that you're able to keep respecting yourself.

If one or more of them falls over, then you'll end up returning to your previous state of unhappiness.

When introducing the pillars, it's important to give yourself seven days to adopt each one. You'll need this time to experiment with each of them and observe and record the differences.

So, what are the four pillars of wellbeing and how do you apply them?



## Week 1 PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical activity is the first pillar of wellbeing that needs to be used to break old habits. It sounds simple but it works every time. It's the quickest way to shift mood. It's also the first way in which you can start meeting your needs separate from others around you. It's time to make *you* important. The last thing you need to do right now is think. Instead, get up and get active.

Activity can come in all forms. It may include such things as running, swimming, walking, lifting weights, cycling and aerobics. It could be yoga, martial arts or playing sports such as basketball, tennis and soccer.

Whatever the activity, it needs to occur right now. In addition, the activity needs to occur on a daily basis. You'll notice improvements in your health and fitness, but you'll also realise a key underlying psychological principle – you matter!

If you're prioritising physical activity on a daily basis it says a lot about what you think about yourself.

### DAILY DIARY ENTRY

Keeping diary entries on a daily basis is crucial in the early stages of this process. You have to do this because you need to acknowledge the changes you're making every day. Remember – do things differently and get different outcomes.

My suggestion is to go out and buy a diary that reflects your character. Make sure it's one that will mean something to you and that you'll treat with respect. Then bullet point your behaviours in the diary on a daily basis. At the beginning, I just want short recordings of your daily fitness activities. From this you can begin to see any patterns that might emerge and can review this at any time if you start to worry about your lack of change.

## Week 2 SOCIAL ACTIVITY

Social activity is the second pillar of wellbeing. By making the effort to initiate social activity, you're breaking old patterns. You'll not only enjoy the company of others, but it will get you away from sitting around dwelling on issues. It stimulates you and requires you to make conversation, listen to others and meet new people.

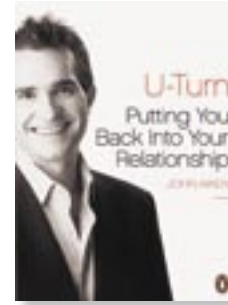
There are numerous types of social activity available to you. It can be meeting friends for coffee, going to a restaurant or holding a dinner party. It can involve small or large groups, and it may occur within the context of sport, music, movies or theatre. The important part is that you initiate social activity and it must happen on a weekly basis.

### DAILY DIARY ENTRY

Start including your social activity within your diary. Make a point of putting down at least two social events that you initiated during that week. It might be that you do more than two. That's fine, as long as you record them so that you can see your change.



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John Aiken's new book, *U-Turn: Putting You Back Into Your Relationship*, is published by Penguin, RRP \$29.95, and will be available in September.

\*To find out about our **Next** reader events featuring John Aiken, please refer to page 238 of this issue.

### Week 3 SELF-ACTIVITY

The third pillar of wellbeing is self-activity – activities that you do purely for yourself. They may involve cooking, listening to music, gardening, shopping, walking on the beach, watching your favourite TV show or having a long hot bath.

They might include having a coffee, seeing a movie, reading a book, going for a drive or getting a haircut. Whatever the activity – remember it's purely for you.

Whatever your choice of self-activity, it's crucial that it occurs on a daily basis. In addition, it's vital that you do a different activity from the one you did the day before. This extends you and makes you explore your various preferences.

It doesn't need to cost you anything and it doesn't have to go on for a long period of time. The important thing is that you prioritise yourself. These self-activities are to remind you that you matter.

If you go to bed at night and you've done nothing for yourself that day – then get up and take action.

#### DAILY DIARY ENTRY

It's vital that you keep a record of the self-activities that you complete every day. This will force you to make room for them in your daily routine and you'll be able to pinpoint any new preferences.

If you get on a roll, then do more than one daily self-activity and write these down. It will give you encouragement to continue to break patterns and take control of your life.

### Week 4 EMOTIONAL ACTIVITY

The fourth pillar is emotional activity. First you need to learn how to describe your emotions. Avoid telling people what you think, rather than how you feel, and neutral terms like 'good', 'not bad', 'all right' and 'fine'.

You can also encourage feelings by thinking of some of your favourites things – for example: shoes, perfume, food, wine, car, colour, TV show or movie. Then ask yourself, 'How does it make me feel?'

Once you're comfortable with identifying your feelings, your next focus becomes taking action on them. This is when the going gets really tough. You'll be scared about this because of the consequences. I'm asking you to do what doesn't come naturally to you: to make decisions based on your feelings rather than your head.

To take action, you need to target procrastination. Identify the things in your life that you're avoiding, then use your

feelings to get direction. Ask yourself, 'How does it make me feel to do...' or 'How does it make me feel if I don't do...'

Whatever the answer, take action. The important part of this process is to expose yourself to fallout rather than avoid it. Simply go with your feelings and see what happens. It will empower you and develop your level of resilience.

#### DAILY DIARY ENTRY

Divide your page into two and write your feelings for every event or activity that occurs. Only use one word to describe each feeling and use different ones to keep yourself honest. So by week four, your diary will have recordings of your fitness activities, weekly social events, daily self-activities, feelings and any decisions you made based on your gut.

By implementing these pillars you can separate yourself from others and start to gain momentum in your life. ☑

