



RENOVATE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

– A manual for men

Relationships Australia (Victoria) and MensLine Australia (Crisis Support Services) are pleased to launch this new resource for men. The booklet explores how relationships can be renovated and provides a wide range of tools for men to use.

Many men tell us that they didn't see the problems in their relationship until it was too late. These guys wish they had done maintenance work beforehand and never reached this point.

The 24 page manual provides men with a set of practical skills; tools to renovate their most important relationship.



THE TOOLBOX

Working together / Avoiding misunderstandings / Sharpen up your listening / Resolving conflict / When the roof blows off! Anger and frustration / Who has the power? Abuse and violence / Self-maintenance / Renovate your sex life / Love / Valuing difference / Appreciation / When trust breaks down / Children – Planning for the extension

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RENOVATE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

A manual for men

Simple toolbox. Easy steps.

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Research, writing, editing, book design and production by
Helpful Partners Pty Ltd.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the many men we work with and who put continual effort into improving their relationships. We have drawn on some of their quotes and reflections.

Funding

Relationships Australia receives funding from the Australian, State and Territory Governments and other agencies. We gratefully acknowledge this support which assists us to provide relationship services.

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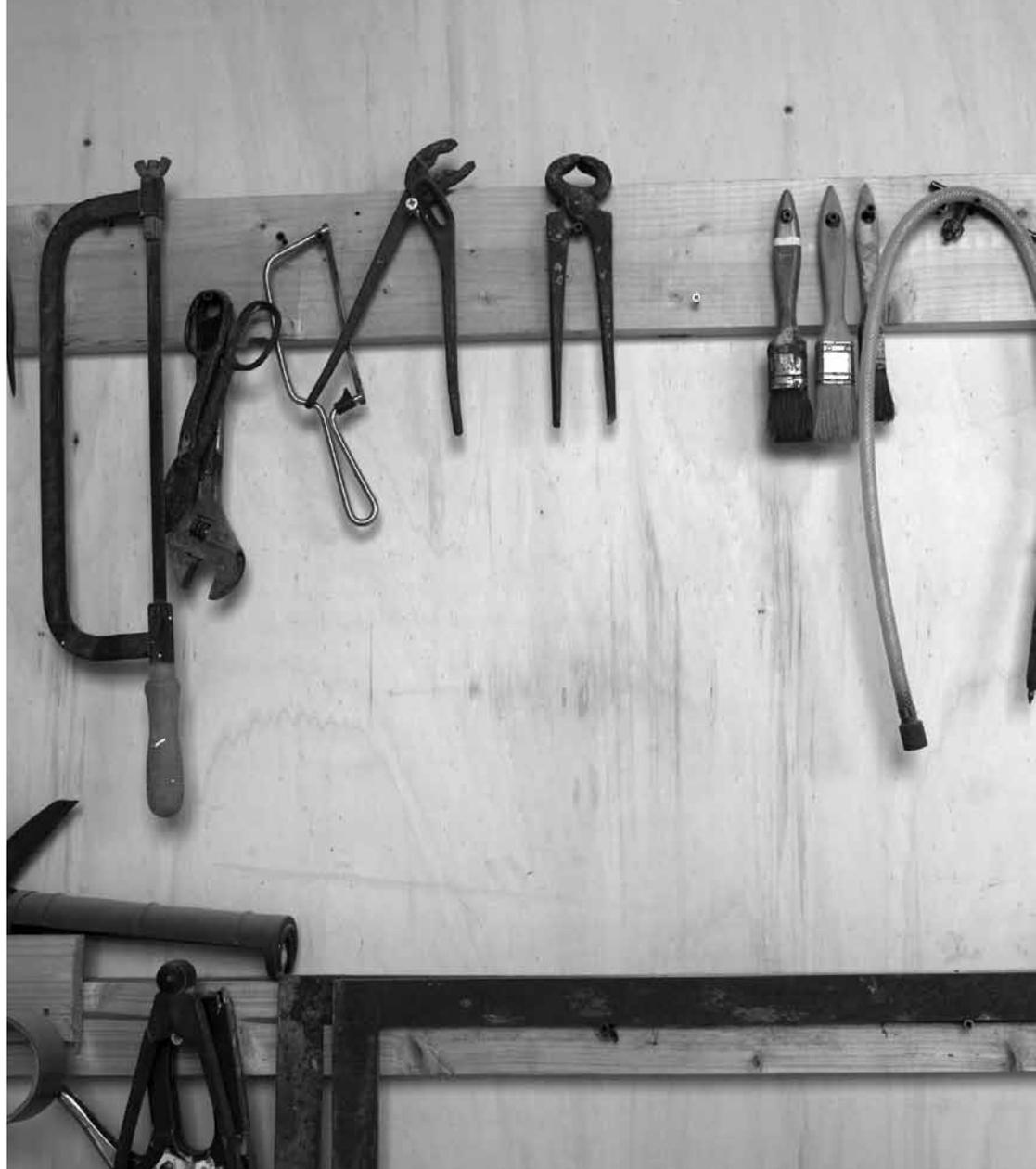
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About this booklet

Like a manual, this booklet is best dipped into, not read from cover to cover. Making changes can be difficult and requires courage.

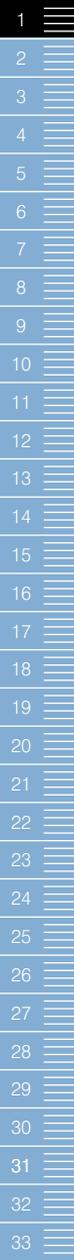
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Send your feedback to feedback@menslineaus.org.au



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WHY THIS BOOKLET?

Many men tell us that they didn't see the problems in their relationship before it was too late. These guys wish they had done maintenance work beforehand and never reached this point.

More often than not separations are initiated by women. When relationships break down, men feel gutted, their trust and confidence is knocked big time. As if the building has suddenly collapsed.

The challenge for men is to see the tell-tale cracks appearing and take action.

Your renovation project

Most men don't look at instructions until they cannot get something to work. Not always the best way!

This manual is a call to action. Don't wait until your relationship is in trouble. Use this manual as your set of instructions for your most important renovation project. It's worth the work!

The book has been inspired by the men who work with us and who we have worked with over many years.

Relationships Australia, MensLine Australia
2009



The project: Renovate your relationship

Project rationale:

- Relationships are critically important for both men and women.
- Men can take the initiative for relationship maintenance or improvement.
- Men can be more alert to early warning signs when their relationships are in difficulty.
- Men can tackle issues before they become a crisis.

A crisis point in a relationship is usually too late to bring about positive relationship change.

Men are good at projects

Men put a lot of energy into renovating houses. Not just paintwork, keeping things solid underneath.

You **can** use your skills to make your relationship work!

'We stopped talking about stuff and just did what was needed to be done around the house. Guess we just grew apart.' Nathan, 29

'I had a sense it wasn't the best but I thought we were doing ok. I did all the physical stuff around the house but I didn't think much about anything. We didn't talk about it. Then the crisis came. Now she's gone I realise we never talked. Guess I should have acted earlier.' Jim, 47

For more on the project scope and overview see **Men and relationships** page 4

For the project tools see **Project toolbox** page 8

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PROJECT SCOPE: MEN AND RELATIONSHIPS

Changing times

Think centimetres and laser levels, not inches and spirit levels!

Confused?

Sometimes that's how relationships feel these days.

The old, 'me breadwinner, you homemaker' model is gone, and now relationships are much more about 'equal partnership'.

Most partners now work so domestic tasks are shared. Many men want a better balance in their lives between work and home and want to be more involved in parenting.

The wear and tear, the stresses and strains of life

Financial worries, work pressures, chronic illness, death in the family, losing a job, moving house, having children, the list goes on.

Stresses and strains bring new challenges to couples every day.

Project overview

Think about all the things you really value such as:

- your partner
- your house
- your garden
- your hobbies
- your sport
- your car
- your family
- your friends
- your job.

Now, if you had to give them up, which would you give up last?

For most men, their relationships with others are more important than anything else. How about you?

Project features that other men like

Men identify their partner as their best mate.
(True for 80% of Australian Men).*

Men want close and tender relationships with their partner.

Men feel confused, hurt or betrayed when relationships do not work out.

Men often do not express their emotions and sometimes their partners often fail to recognise the significant feelings that men experience.

Men want closeness; to be supported, to be held.

Men want a trusting, honest and loyal friend.

Men want somebody to share things with; goals, hopes and values.

* *Men, mateship, marriage: Exploring macho myths and the way forward* by Don Edgar (1997). Refer page 24.



Project plan

What do you want to build?

Generally, you can't build without some sort of a plan.

Take a look at the list opposite. Tick some boxes or add things of your own.

Now take the next step...

Sit down with your partner and ask them what they want.

This is a listening challenge (for instructions on listening see page 11).

Are you both looking for similar things from your relationship?

It's easier to plan a renovation if you are both looking at the same plans.

Renovation is a lot easier if your partner is involved.

'It was only when I sat down and really listened to my partner that I remembered how much we had in common.' John, 48

Measuring up

Many relationships work fine without all these components. But your answers and your differences should help you identify where your relationship needs work.

What do you want from your relationship?

Do you want to:

- talk about friends, activities and how your day went
- discuss issues openly and make joint decisions
- share the cooking, housework and parenting
- share similar values
- have differing likes and dislikes and respect the difference
- offer comfort when the other is upset
- talk through and resolve conflict
- be able to be alone without feeling lonely
- feel valued, listened to and encouraged
- trust and feel trusted
- have a sex life you both enjoy
- feel you can be yourself?

Do you want someone to:

- talk with on a deeper level
- have children with
- share the parenting pleasures and responsibilities
- help bring in the money
- share worries, concerns and problems with
- do things with: travel, eating out, dancing, outings with friends etc
- share interests with: sport, film, music etc
- make plans for the future with
- grow old with
- love
- share intimacy with, not just sex.



Project foundations

Good relationships are built on this scaffolding.

Trust, respect and equality

Partners respect themselves and each other.

Partners feel equal, there is no ownership or domination by one person.

There are equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities.

Mutual trust develops over time holding the relationship firmly in place (see **When trust breaks down** page 20).

Mutual decision making and shared responsibility

Both people share responsibility for the tasks and decisions.

'We both work so we share the tasks. It's not like we do half of everything. I don't do much shopping or cooking but I do other stuff like getting the kids showered and cleaning up the kitchen. It works for us.' Aman, 34

Resolving conflict

Unresolved conflict can damage relationships. In good relationships couples work out a way of discussing issues and difficulties so that they don't keep coming back (see **Resolving conflict** in the Project Toolbox page 12).

'My family avoided conflict. Mum wouldn't argue in front of the kids dad just hoped the problem would just go away. In my relationship, I started off just like them but the same issues kept coming back again and again and we nearly broke up. It's not like we agree on everything but at least we talk about issues and difficulties so that they don't keep coming back.' Craig, 47

Good communication

The strongest feature of a healthy relationship is good communication. Partners can communicate thoughts, feelings and opinions in an environment of openness and acceptance (see **Sharpen up your listening** in the Project Toolbox page 11).

'She just listens quietly and once I get going I am able to talk about things I never would have told anyone before we met! She is my best mate!'

Intimacy

Without intimacy couples drift apart and lose that closeness that once made the relationship vital and exciting. Intimacy means different things to different people.

'It is hard to answer the question 'what is intimacy?' I know I take it for granted. It can happen when we talk or share deep stuff about each other. It's not just about hugs, kisses or even sex. I know it demands a lot of trust between you and that other person. It's actually more about that closeness you feel together.' Con, 55

Embrace change. Adapt or get left behind.



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PROJECT TOOLBOX

Check out these tools and see how they work for you.
Come back to them periodically and reassess.

Project tools

DIY means doing it yourself – not leaving it up to someone else!

Tool 1: Working together?

Tool 2: Avoiding misunderstandings

Tool 3: Sharpen up your listening

Tool 4: Resolving conflict

Tool 5: When the roof blows off!
Anger and frustration

Tool 6: Who has the power?
Abuse and violence

Tool 7: Self-maintenance

Tool 8: Renovate your sex life

Tool 9: Love

Tool 10: Valuing differences

Tool 11: Appreciation

Tool 12: When trust breaks down

Tool 13: Children – Planning for the
extension

Sometimes a professional is necessary!

Like calling for an electrician, if things get tricky you can always call for help.





Tool 1: Working together?

A reality check

A renovation project is easier with a mate to work with. A mate who is working with you, one you know, trust and like.

You might think you know everything there is to know about yourself and your partner, but have you really thought about it? Do you still have the same hopes, dreams and values?

Here is a set of questions. Write down your answers then ask your partner to do the same. Make a date with each other to share your answers.

Tell each other what you've both come up with. It's a good idea to listen without any interruption or debate. Just take in what your partner says, or agree to share your notes.

How do the answers affect your renovation project?

'I was unsure about doing this exercise but apart from a couple of points of difference, it was reassuring to realise that we both still care about the same things after all this time.' Anton, 39

My thoughts about me:

My life works best when...

My relationship works best when...

2 most important things in my life

2 things I hate doing

2 beliefs/values I like in me

2 ways I behave that I like about myself

2 aspects of me that I value in my relationship

2 aspects of me that I would like to change

My thoughts about my partner:

2 most important things in my partner's life

2 things your partner hates doing

2 beliefs/values I like in my partner

2 ways my partner behaves that I like

2 things about my partner that I value in my relationship

2 things about my partner that I would like her to work on



Tool 2: Avoiding misunderstandings

Some people are better communicators than others. Communication is something we all need to learn and improve on, because it's an essential part of any healthy relationship.

Communication is very complex. We may hear things incorrectly, or misinterpret the message. It is important when communicating with your partner that you:

- are clear about what you want to communicate
- convey your message so that it can be received and understood as you want it to be.

It is also important that your partner:

- hears your message accurately
- understands what you mean.

Misunderstandings can occur at any stage and this may lead to hurt, confusion or anger. It is important to guard against distortion and make sure that your message is heard by your partner without them feeling attacked.

Try:

- being aware of how you are feeling about your partner at the time. This can influence how you communicate
- using 'I' statements like 'I am sad that you decided not to help them out', not 'You never want to help them'
- checking with your partner about whether you have understood their message accurately before continuing.



See **Active listening** page 11

Communicating isn't just about words – your tone of voice, facial expressions, body language or even your silence communicate as much, if not more, than the words spoken.

'I have to work away from home a lot and one night my partner started crying saying I was not at home enough. I responded 'What would you like me to do? I am prepared to leave my job but it's going to be hard to find another one.' She replied 'I don't want you to do anything! I just want you to listen and hear what I'm saying!' As a guy I tend to jump to trying to find a solution. It's easy to forget that listening is often the best place to start.' Barry, 35



Tool 3: Sharpen up your listening

Everyone has two ears and one mouth

Many people complain that their feelings, opinions and priorities are ignored or not heard.

It is sometimes hard to show that you are actively listening (particularly if it's stuff you don't want to hear).

However, there are some simple techniques for good listening (if you are serious about renovating your relationship).

Active listening do's

- Make good eye contact.
- Speak quietly but clearly.
- Be relaxed and try not to frown.
- Use lots of nods, 'uh huhs...' and 'I see...'
- If your partner says something you do not get, ask for clarification.
- Ask 'open' questions that begin with, 'who...', 'what...', 'where...' or 'when...'. These open up conversation and invite them to continue what they are saying.
- If your mind wanders, admit it and apologise. They will notice anyway!

Try to summarise what they have said and how they feel. Use your own words and say something like 'it sounds like you feel... when I...'



Active listening don'ts

- Don't criticise them or enter into a debate. This will either end the conversation or start an argument.
- Don't cut your partner off before they have finished speaking.
- Don't try to correct them or defend yourself. Just listen.
- Try not to leap to a solution. It is possible that they just want you to listen, rather than offer suggestions.

Why should I practise this?

Because good listening is love in action, it will bring you closer. If you want to be heard, then first learn to listen.

The aim is simply to hear what your partner thinks and feels, not to score points.

If you can find the courage to ask your partner 'How can I do better as a partner?' and then listen to her with the skills above, then you may have done a mighty thing for your relationship.





Tool 4: Resolving conflict

Unresolved repeated conflict is like rust – it can corrode something that once was fresh and strong. Like rust, you cannot just leave it and hope it will go away.

The bad news: conflict is inevitable.

The good news: if dealt with properly it need not be destructive.

Child safety alert!

It can be very distressing for children if their parents argue and fight in front of them. If you are abusive towards each other in front of your children, this can negatively affect your children.

Signs of damaging conflict

Are your disagreements and arguments always about the same things?

Do you end up shouting, name calling or being hostile?

Does one of you:

- defend yourself and make out it's nothing to do with you?
- refuse to talk it over?
- become so angry and upset that you can forget what you are arguing about?
- take hours or days to calm down?

The anti-corrosion treatment

- Think about something you repeatedly argue about.
- Talk about it at a time when you are both feeling good and calm (and not under the influence of alcohol).
- Speak to your partner without being demeaning or intimidating.
- Complain about what your partner does, not what they are.
- Listen to what your partner says it's like for them.
- Accept responsibility for what you can. Change what you can about your behaviour even while asking them to change their own.
- Remind yourself what is good in your partner. Tell them.
- Don't lose your sense of humour!

'We were having the usual argument because I hadn't cleaned up. She doesn't realise how much I actually do. When I calmed down we were able to discuss it like two adults. I was able to admit that the point she was making was fair enough.' Theo, 43

Unresolvable issues

For some people there are issues that will never be resolved. Sometimes it is useful to know what these are and simply agree to leave them alone.

Consulting a professional

If you think you and your partner do have difficulty resolving conflict, you might need to consult a professional. If your conflict gets out of control, if there is frequent abuse and shouting, you should seek help.

See **Where to get further assistance** page 23.



Tool 5: When the roof blows off! Anger and frustration

For many men, anger and frustration are the feelings most easy to express. It may not be so easy to express hurt, sadness or fear.

Feelings of anger or frustration need to be managed carefully to ensure they don't damage communication. Anger is not usually a good response to problems, even if it seems helpful in the short term.

What can I do?

If you are in the middle of an argument, don't just walk off. Ask for time out but tell your partner you'll be back to finish the discussion. Then your leaving won't make matters worse for them.

Find a way to calm down. Do something physical. Walk, run, smack a tennis ball around for a while, kick a footy, anything to get that pent up energy out and cool down!

'It's taken me ages to be able to talk things through. It is not about being wimpy or aggressive. It is recognising that others have feelings and needs too and that the differences between you must be negotiated.'
Christopher, 47

- Get clearer about what you are feeling. Behind the anger are you hurt, sad or some other feeling? Listen to your body.
- Get clearer about exactly what is making you angry. Often the smallest things can annoy us, if we are tired or stressed.
- Often the smallest things become big when they are not dealt with quickly. Don't let things build up. Telling someone that you felt angry when they did or said something is more helpful than sitting on it or acting out.
- Stay focused on what you want to say. Don't let the situation escalate into a yelling match.
- Be careful about who you express your anger to. Don't just dump it on the people closest to you, or on people who are less powerful than you. For example, don't yell at your partner, children, or dog when you are really angry with your boss.
- Ask yourself 'if I was managing this better, what would my partner, children or work colleagues be seeing and hearing?'





Tool 6: Who has the power?

Abuse and violence

Relationships have power differences in them. Often power in relationships can be imbalanced. How do you and your partner manage power?

- Does someone have more power?
- Does someone want to be top-dog?
- Does someone want to make all the decisions?
- Does someone want to have the final word?

Has the power in the relationship become fixed in favour of one over the other? Is one person more concerned about imposing their will?

Power sharing

Healthy relationships are built on the values of equality and respect. Power is shared and there is no attempt to make one partner subject to the will of the other. Decisions are made together or at least with the consent of the other partner.

Abuse: the greatest risk to your relationship

There is never any excuse for threatening, abusive and violent behaviour, no matter how angry or frustrated we are. This is the greatest risk to any relationship. It brings unwanted and damaging consequences for all concerned – your partner, your children and yourself. Violence is against the law.

Other forms of abuse

Abuse or family violence may be:

Physical: hitting, slapping, restraining, threatening

Verbal: harassing, frightening, insulting, undermining

Sexual: forcing a partner to have sex against their will

Emotional: ignoring, controlling

Social: using put-downs, lying to others about a partner

Financial: controlling money, incurring debts without consultation

Spiritual: not letting a partner practise their religion

Stalking: spying, loitering, harassing.

The warning signs

- Do you feel you have to control people by imposing your will?
- Do you have difficulty expressing your needs which results in you feeling stressed or powerless?
- Do you have a short fuse and a pattern of exploding?
- Do you get angry when you drink?
- Do you withdraw and don't say anything until you can't stand it anymore?
- Do you lack respect for your partner?

If this sounds like you, you may need help. Contact:

MensLine on 1300 78 99 78 (www.menslineaus.org.au) or

Relationships Australia on 1300 364 277 (www.relationships.com.au).



- Stop and think before you act.
- Take time out to cool down.
- Talk about your feelings or what you want.
- Be prepared to negotiate.
- Ask for help (see contact information for MensLine Australia and Relationships Australia).



If you behave abusively or violently you need to change. It is unlikely you can change this behaviour on your own. The first steps to change are:

- taking responsibility for your behaviour
- seeking help.

This takes courage.

'The leader of this anger management group was talking about controlling strong emotions. Suddenly he kicked a chair. I was shocked and the light dawned. This is what my partner feels when I kick or hit the wall at home. I went home and told her, now I understand.' Greg, 32

Tool 7: Self-maintenance

Looking after yourself

Many men spend all their time and energy providing for the family. As a result we can become cut off from the people and activities we used to enjoy.

This situation may get worse when children come along. Of course you want to care for your partner and your children. But you have the responsibility to look after yourself. Just as men are notoriously bad at going to the doctor, we also sometimes do not take good care of ourselves in other ways.

Claiming your space

Togetherness is great, but everyone needs some quiet time or space, particularly in an intimate relationship and especially when there is a growing family.

Many men claim space in their 'sheds', where they can retreat at times for some quiet reflection. Maybe you have a study or a studio, or somewhere altogether different – the garden, perhaps. Establish your own space, somewhere you can fully relax and recharge (but don't forget to come out sometimes!).

Work/life balance

'My daughter has cystic fibrosis. It changed our lives. I became a workaholic. My wife and I never talked about anything else. I was burning out. I managed to see what was happening before it wrecked my marriage. My partner and I settled for a more relaxed lifestyle. I earn less but my daughter still gets good care and life is heaps better.' Rodney, 54

'Frankly, you can't expect to work on your relationship unless you've got your own shit together.' Ben, 35

Depression and anxiety

Depression is more than a low mood. It's a serious illness in which you feel sad, down or miserable most of the time.

Anxiety is a feeling that something bad is going to happen. You may feel irritable or constantly in a bad mood. Anxiety can affect your physical health. If you regularly feel depressed or anxious see your GP or call *beyondblue* on 1300 22 4636 (www.beyondblue.org.au).

Drugs, alcohol and other ways of coping

It's easy to turn to drugs or alcohol if you're feeling low. Other men may smoke too much or overeat.

These unhealthy coping behaviours actually lead to more stress in the long term. Be aware of this cycle.

Friends

Relationships tend to be stronger when partners don't just have mutual friends but maintain their own friends as well.

Don't cut yourself off from friends. Call up an old mate and organise an activity you enjoy together.

- Have regular health checks. Make sure your doctor covers blood pressure, diabetes, prostate, heart disease, cholesterol and diet?
- Do something each day to stay fit.
- Have at least 2 alcohol-free days each week.
- Manage stress with healthy relaxation methods.
- Negotiate a good balance of time for yourself as well as time as a couple.





Tool 8: Renovate your sex life

Don't confuse sex with intimacy

If sex is the physical act, intimacy is the closeness of feeling loved, valued, respected for yourself without judgement.

Without this kind of intimacy sex can become a desperate and disappointing experience.

Intimacy with a partner does not always need to result in having sex.

Talk about it

Men may not have the same desires as their partners.

Sex is complicated. It probably means different things to you and your partner. It may be a new and challenging discussion for you but it's worth it if you genuinely desire a deeper relationship.

Discuss these things with your partner:

- What do they love about your relationship?
- What excites them sexually?
- Are there things that don't work for your partner sexually?
- Share your likes and dislikes with your partner.
- How can you work together to improve your sex lives?

'I was so craving contact. It's terrible. Some of my friends go off to hookers. I went and had fortnightly massages instead. It helped but it is still terrible.' Tony, 26

It's different for women

Sex for many men can be automatic, planned and quick, but for many women, it is something that requires time, lots of just cuddling and maybe slowly moving towards foreplay.

'I love my wife dearly and we have a fabulous marriage and care for each other deeply. I still find my wife sexually attractive and would love to make love to her... over the past several years I have really suffered in silence to the point I could just sit down and cry. I mean, a male my age does not cry, nor does he speak about the problem' The Sex Diaries, Bettina Arndt

Sexual dysfunction

Sexual dysfunction or erectile problems are often temporary. They can be a symptom of relationship difficulties but many other factors can be the cause – health problems, stress, anxiety, concern about sexual performance, depression or the effects of a past sexual trauma.

Don't ignore it. If you have persistent problems, chat to your GP.





Tool 9: Love

Feelings of love change a lot throughout a relationship.

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| Romance | The passionate, intense phase. |
| Challenges | Kids, money, stress and family crises kick in. This can lead to disillusionment as we just try to survive day by day. |
| Companions | Getting through the challenges together brings strong friendship. We like and respect one another. This is a mature love. |

Love requires regular maintenance

It's easy to take love for granted, but like a machine, love needs regular upkeep if it is to stay fresh and alive.

What can you do or say that will really make your partner feel loved?

'I got into the habit of praising the special things that I like and that she does really well. The stuff I used to complain about became less important.' Rick, 42

Love matters

- Say positive words of praise, appreciation and value. Both in private and public. Look for things that your partner does right, and say something appreciative about them, rather than looking for things your partner does wrong.
- Spend quality time together. Give your partner extended times of your undivided (and uncritical) attention.
- Give special or thoughtful gifts. Take the time to learn what your partner would like and go to some trouble to make or find things that are special.
- Do practical things to help out. Do them willingly, before you're asked.
- Give good physical touch. Touching should always soothe, delight, pleasure or relax your partner.
- Engage in soul talk. Share your most meaningful feelings and encourage your partner to share theirs. Ask questions and follow up later.
- Create beautiful romantic experiences like revisiting the place where you first met.
- Allow for space, time and activities apart, so that time together is even richer.
- Don't be possessive e.g. needing to know where your partner is 24 hours of the day or trying to control what they do.



Tool 10: Valuing differences

People are often initially attracted to one other because their partner is different to themselves. Then over time, these differences can be seen as problems.

For example, the way she took extra time to get ready was really cute at first, now it drives you crazy. Perhaps you think, 'if only she was more like me it would be fine' or even 'if only she did what I said it would be fine'.

Relationships highlight differences. We can either focus on these as a source of conflict, or see the differences as something to value, respect and enjoy.

Accepting differences enriches your life. Rather than wanting your partner to do things the same as you, appreciate the ways in which your partner is different from you.

Seeing difference differently

Are the differences between you and your partner a source of conflict?

- Talk about how you are different in a spirit of acceptance.
- Avoid power struggles over whose 'way' is the best way. Take turns to do things each other's way.
- See your differences as an opportunity to see the world from your partner's point of view.
- Practise patience.
- Accommodate, negotiate and respect the impact of your actions on one another.
- Notice when your partner's different perspective has a positive impact on you. Tell them.

'My wife likes to go clothes shopping with her friends. It used to get to me. I have to remember she is very supportive of my projects even though they don't interest her much.' Adam, 36





Tool 11: Appreciation

Acknowledge your appreciation of your partner by:

- telling them, often
- taking responsibility for organising activities so that this responsibility is not just their job
- making meals or sharing household chores
- willingly participating in activities organised by your partner
- giving simple gifts that have meaning to your partner.

'I knew something was wrong in our relationship but didn't know how to approach it. Then I found heaps of intimate text messages in my partner's phone. We finally talked and decided to go to see a counsellor. Over the past few months, it has been hard and it has demanded all my patience. It's as if we've had to back to the beginning again. I'll just see how it goes' Jamal, 32



Tool 12: When trust breaks down

Feeling betrayed or experiencing breakdown of trust are some of the most difficult issues facing relationships.

Trust is a core part of the relationship. It is built up slowly, lost in an instant and only recovered in the face of repeated evidence of trustworthiness.

Destructive comments, actions, a flash point of violence or an affair are all moments where trust can vaporise.

'If trust goes you cannot talk it back. You cannot persuade or be persuaded that it is back. Trust is earned by actions over time. You must be trustworthy over and over again to be trusted. It took years for us to trust each other again' Simon, 62

If trust breaks down in your relationship:

- ensure that all people (adults and children) are kept safe
- think first before you act! Your immediate response will be influenced by the flood of feeling you experience. It is unlikely to result in useful decision-making
- ring MensLine Australia on 1300 78 99 78
- ring Relationships Australia for local counselling on 1300 364 277
- with the support of others talk through with your partner what has happened and what needs to occur in the future.



Tool 13: Children – Planning for the extension

The arrival of the first child is often the start of your steepest learning curve. You and your partner may never have done this before. Overnight the relationship changes from being a couple, to being parents.

Men often feel there is little they can do, but actually dads have a significant impact on the mother and child's well-being, both when children are new-born and growing up.

The benefits of being a dad

Having a dad who is sensitive and supportive of a child's autonomy leads to the child having fewer behaviour problems and higher social skills – independent of the mother's effects.

Research shows that fathers have a significant impact on:

- reducing a child's chances of being overweight
- the mother's success at breastfeeding
- children's emotional regulation
- adolescents' social competence
- children's maths and language development.

There are even more benefits to children:

- when they are parented cooperatively by both parents
- where the parents have an emotionally intimate relationship

- where the kids do not feel caught up in the tensions or conflict between their parents.

What can I do?

Get involved and spend time with your children.

Work as a team, sharing the parenting:

- when children are new-born: cooking, nappy changes, getting up in the middle of the night and playing with the child.
- when children are older: transport, homework, sporting activities.

Talk through the impact that children have on your sex life.

- With constant interruptions and disturbed sleep, sex can be seen more as a duty rather than as intimacy. Talk about your feelings and listen to your partner.

Try to have regular time off, separately and together.

- Organise a night out at the movies, or a meal out to allow you and your partner to reconnect with each other, so that the relationship doesn't become too distant or disconnected.

No matter the age of your children:

- Take the children out with you at least once a week to share activities you enjoy. Your partner will love the break.
- Have at least one night a week where you read the story and tuck them into bed.
- Make their breakfast or lunch. Ask about their day, tell them about yours.





'I was feeling so bad, like we were in this pattern but we couldn't get out of it and I thought, well if I have a plumbing problem I get a plumber; we need an expert! We haven't looked back since'. Tim, 28

RESOURCES

When it's time to consult a professional

Counselling

Lots of men struggle with the idea of seeing a counsellor, as they think 'I should be able to work this out' and 'I'm not going to have someone else tell me what to do'.

Myths:

I should be able to work this out on my own.

A counsellor will tell me what to do.

Seeing a counsellor is failing, giving up and a sign of weakness.

Independence and self-reliance are admirable qualities, but so is consultation and reflection. When we are part of a couple we have to become both independent and interdependent in ways that we both want and value. Counselling can be helpful from time to time, to get us out of a bind or unhelpful habits.

Counselling can:

- assist you clarify for yourself what you want
- support you to implement it yourself, because only you can.

And it takes strength and courage. A counsellor will help you use your own resources to deal with issues or find ways of improving your relationship.

Family dispute resolution

This is a service that couples usually access when they are separating. It is used to resolve issues of parenting and property. It assists couples to deal with these issues in ways that work as well as possible for them and their children, rather than going to court.

Getting legal advice as part of this process can be useful, so that decisions are not made in isolation. Separation is a difficult experience and many participants value being able to address these issues in the presence of a trained third party. It may not be appropriate if there is a history of domestic violence or mental health issues.

For more information on Family Dispute Resolution or to contact a Family Relationship Centre go to:

www.ag.gov.au/www/agd/agd.nsf/Page/Families

www.familyrelationships.gov.au and search for Family Relationship Centre.

You can also call:

- Family Relationship Advice Line on 1800 050 321
- Relationships Australia on 1300 364 277.

Where to get further assistance

**Contact any of these organisations.
They can refer you to services in your area.**

MensLine Australia
1300 78 99 78
www.menslineaus.org.au

A professional telephone information and support service for men, specialising in relationship and family concerns. Available nationally, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Cost of a local call (mobile phone call charges apply).

Relationships Australia
1300 364 277
www.relationships.com.au

Relationships Australia has been providing professional counselling, family dispute resolution, family violence prevention, relationship skills education and training services to individuals, couples and families for over 60 years. A network of over 80 offices is spread throughout all Australian states and territories.

Centrelink
13 61 50
www.centrelink.gov.au

Information on all government benefits.

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Debt Education and Mediation Centre
1300 731 722

Assists people with debt crises and money management skills.

Family Relationship Advice Line
1800 050 321
www.familyrelationships.gov.au

The Family Relationship Advice Line is a national telephone service established to assist families affected by relationship or separation issues.

Family Assistance Office
13 61 50
www.familyassist.gov.au

Payments information for people receiving family assistance.

Suicide Call Back Service
1300 659 467

Free professional telephone counselling and support for people at risk of suicide, their carers and people bereaved by suicide. Available seven days a week, the service provides up to six sessions of specialist support with the same counsellor.

Websites

Relationship Basics
<http://family-marriage-counseling.com/mentalhealth/relationship-basics.htm>

Good Connecting, an online relationships course for couples.
<http://relationships victoria.com.au/>

Suggested reading

Books

Arndt, Bettina. *The Sex Diaries – Why women go off sex and other bedroom battles*. Melbourne University Press. 2009.

Biddulph, Steve. *Manhood*. 3rd edition. Finch Publishing. 2002.

Edgar, Don. *Men, mateship, marriage: Exploring macho myths and the way forward*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1997.

Hamilton, Maggie. *What men don't talk about*. Viking, Penguin. 2006.

Harris, Russel. *The Happiness Trap*. Wollombi, N.S.W. Exisle Publishing, 2007.

Hamrin Robert. *Great Dads - building loving, lasting relationships with your children*. Cook Communications Ministries Available from www.greatdads.org

Schnarch, David. *Passionate Marriage*. Scribe. 1999.

Moore, Thomas. *Soulmates*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1994.

Moore, Thomas. *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*. HarperCollins Publishers. 1994.

Relationships Australia booklets

Check out these Relationships Australia booklets, all available from the Resources/publications section of www.relationships.com.au

Partners – A Guide to Successful Relationships

On being a dad



RENOVATE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Many men tell us that they didn't see the problems in their relationship before it was too late. These guys wish they had done maintenance work beforehand and never reached this point.

Most men don't look at instructions until something is seriously wrong. Don't wait until your relationship is in trouble. Use this manual as your set of instructions to renovate your most important relationship.

Relationships Australia

1300 364 277

www.relationships.com.au

www.relationshipsvictoria.com.au

Relationships Australia has been providing professional counselling, family dispute resolution, family violence prevention, relationship skills education and training services to individuals, couples and families for over 60 years. A network of over 80 offices is spread throughout all Australian states and territories.

MensLine Australia

1300 78 99 78 (24 hours – seven days a week)

www.menslineaus.org.au

email: talkitover@menslineaus.org.au

MensLine Australia provides telephone counselling, information and referral services for men with family and relationship concerns. This service is available from anywhere in Australia – cost of a local call (mobile phone call charges apply).

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Research, writing, editing, book design and production by
Helpful Partners Pty Ltd.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the many men we work with and who put continual effort into improving their relationships. We have drawn on some of their quotes and reflections.

Funding

Relationships Australia receives funding from the Australian, State and Territory Governments and other agencies. We gratefully acknowledge this support which assists us to provide relationship services.

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About this booklet

Like a manual, this booklet is best dipped into, not read from cover to cover. Making changes can be difficult and requires courage.

Your feedback

Help us to improve future editions.
Send your feedback to feedback@menslineaus.org.au

