

Do you still want me?

Finding a soulmate is never easy — and then you've got to keep hold of them.

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The Ancient Romans used to say that nothing human can be made perfect. I don't disagree but surely all of us strive to make the very best secure and loving relationship we can? Between a third and a half of those who embark on marriage, however, come unstuck. The divorce rate for those previously married is even higher. So our ideals need some practical help. At the outset, I assume there is general agreement about the importance of clear communication. Without a problem-solving and explaining system in your family life, it is difficult to avoid conflict.

My first suggestion is to treat a relationship as "bigger than you are". You cannot control its entire shape, course and outcome. Be humble enough to accept that sometimes things will go wrong. If you cannot get what you want, can you want what you can get? Try not to run away just because there is disagreement. The grass may be greener on the other side of the hill but it will turn into the same old mud if you keep on voting with your feet.

Secondly, a relationship that isn't growing is dying. You cannot be in a partnership just because the law says you are. "We got married" is no guarantee of security. Nowadays, few of us need a partner just to survive economically and so a successful relationship depends on the quality of the intimacy between two people. This in turn depends on the qualities of compatibility between two people and these, in turn, depend on whether you are prepared to make the effort required to keep the partnership alive.

Thirdly, a first-class relationship needs two people to respond to changing circumstances at roughly the same ratio. The law of life says that change is constant but alas some people pretend they are not growing older or can continue to act like children long after they ought to know better. The accusation goes like this: "Your problem is you've changed." And the reply: "And your problem is you haven't."

Fourthly: try to maintain respect. Quite often, you may hate your partner's behaviour. They may have been selfish or careless but it is always better to avoid labelling them. Instead of saying "You're useless" specify which of their acts you will no longer tolerate. Instead of writing them off as "failures", give them definite choices. "You can either talk this through with me or I will start to lose my interest in us. Is that what you want? You decide."

Fifthly: respect for personal space. Nobody truly wants to live in someone else's pocket apart from the odd clothes fetishist and those requiring personal therapy. We have a very important relationship to develop with ourselves, as well as with others. Solitude is as good for the soul as socialising. Being joined at the hip is a recipe for a coma. So, before you get involved with a grown-up in a relationship, be confident that you can lead your own independent life. This will give you enormous strength in the struggles to come.

Sixthly is the matter of respecting priorities. If you are in a "primary" relationship the word implies that when the chips are down you will put the other person first. Finally, realise that what actually matters is your delivery. You can be filled with fine words of love but what you actually "mean" is what you do.

How Perfect Is Your Partner, by Phillip Hodson (Carroll & Brown, £12.99), is available from Times Books First at £10.39 plus p&p. Call 0870 1608080 or visit www.timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy

TIPS TO MAKE LOVE LAST

1 Be able to say sorry — the next day.

- 2** Be able to wait for the other person to say sorry — the next day.
- 3** Have genuine common interests, similar quirks, complementary vices and virtues.
- 4** Want the other's good opinion.
- 5** Enjoy mutual silence and time off.
- 6** Give permission to say unpopular things or voice anxieties.
- 7** Always give verbal encouragement.
- 8** Read the other's moods.
- 9** Take second place often enough.
- 10** Be given first place often enough.
- 11** Learn each other's skills — work and domestic — so each is the other's backup.
- 12** From day one, sort out money issues.
- 13** Make criticism constructive; use assertion skills — "I'd prefer this . . . I won't tolerate that."
- 14** Touch — especially when things are difficult.
- 15** Be open-minded about new ideas and adaptable to change at the same rate