

## Caring Actions for Couples to Enhance their Relationship

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Studies show that partners in distressed relationships reciprocate more uncaring actions than those in satisfied relationships. Successful couples maintain existing caring behaviours and initiate new ones. Exchanging caring actions prevents and contains conflicts. Contented couples are less likely to pick fights. Increasing caring actions is not a substitute for developing good communication skills or cooperatively solving problems. But it will make those tasks easier to do and more likely to succeed.

Partners in unhappy relationships can become routine in their exchange of caring actions. If they become habituated to one another's caring actions, the actions may lose their reward value. Couples who start with a narrow initial range of caring actions are especially vulnerable to erosion of mutual reward. They may take for granted and not show appreciation for caring actions that they still value. Increasing the exchange of caring actions and introducing new ones is a worthwhile activity, both when there is conflict present, and to enhance relationships when there is not. This formula has six steps.

### 1. Become aware of the importance of caring actions

Partners are more attractive to each other if they are caring rather than uncaring. How you act influences how your partner reacts: *'positive actions are likely to induce positive reactions, first in the attitudes of others, and then in their behaviours.'* If you both agree that insufficient caring actions is a problem in your relationship, and you both make efforts to please each other, this will help to rebuild trust.

### 2. Acknowledge existing caring actions

**First**, make a list of your own caring actions that you do for your partner out of love. Note if there is a lack on your part. Listing your own gaps is less threatening than having them pointed out by your partner.

**Second**, list actions that your partner is already doing for you that you find as caring. Discuss your four lists with each other with kindness, not criticism. Avoid hooks and barbed comments.

### 3. Make wish lists for additional caring actions

Now go aside and list the actions that you would like your partner to do for you. State them in the positive, not the negative. Actions should be romantic as well as ordinary, and not all part of the current conflict. Grade items: 1: nice, 2: better, 3: great. Choose actions that will make your partner feel good, not humiliated.

### 4. Share your lists and make agreements

Discuss your lists and get each other's opinion on what you have written. It is important that you are both in agreement and that you are practical and fair. Choose some, around 3 or 4, that you can carry out over the next 2 weeks. Make a contract that you will each carry them out – and actually *do* them. Your agreements do not have to be *exactly* equal, but they should avoid large imbalances.

### 5. Implement your agreement

Carry out the actions as agreed. Ensure that they are accompanied by corresponding body language, messages, and words. Pay attention when doing (not reading a newspaper or texting) and thank each other.

### 6. Review progress and make further agreements

When your 'contract' expires, review the results. Fine-tune your agreement as needed. Outside the agreement, note how caring you are towards your partner. Show gratitude sincerely. Avoid sabotaging your partner's attempts to be more caring by denying that he or she can ever do anything right. Add to the process when you get the chance. Over time, you should find yourself doing more thoughtful and kind things for each other as a matter of course. But don't fall into the habit of only being 'habitual.' Successful relationships require you to be pro-active. Don't take your partner or your relationship for granted. Your relationship needs to be nurtured to prevent it from stagnating, and eventually dying.