



201

RELATIONSHIP  
QUESTIONS

THE COUPLE'S GUIDE TO BUILDING TRUST  
AND EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

BARRIE DAVENPORT

# **201 Relationship Questions: The Couple's Guide to Building Trust and Emotional Intimacy**

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# About **Barrie Davenport**

Barrie Davenport is a certified personal coach, thought leader, author, and creator of several online courses on self-confidence, life passion, and habit creation. She is the founder of two top-ranked personal development sites, [Live Bold and Bloom.com](https://www.liveboldandbloom.com) and [BarrieDavenport.com](https://www.barriedavenport.com). Her work as a coach, blogger, and author is focused on offering people practical strategies for living happier, more successful, and more mindful lives. She utilizes time-tested, evidence-based, action-oriented principles and methods to create real and measurable results for self-improvement.

You can learn more about Barrie on her Amazon author page at [barriedavenport.com/author](https://www.amazon.com/author/barriedavenport).



# Introduction

*The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.*

~Thomas Merton

Consider this for a moment: why did you get involved in your love relationship in the first place? Was it, as Merton suggests, to find a reflection of yourself? Were you hoping to find the one person who would complete you and meet your needs? Maybe you were looking for someone to finally make you happy. What were your expectations from love and this person who stands by your side?

Primarily we develop our love relationship because, well, we fall in love. We are magically drawn to this wonderful person who can do no wrong and whose mere presence makes us melt into a puddle of aching desire. We don't tend to think about the "why" of it. When we find love, we're too deliriously happy to consider the reason for our good fortune. Yet behind the powerful, chemically driven feelings of love and attraction are the more practical desires for companionship, emotional intimacy, and a sense of belonging and security.

Not too long ago, we expected a romantic partnership to inevitably lead to marriage, a contract that ensured some financial stability, respectability, and hopefully progeny. Love and sexual chemistry were optional. Today, most people view marriage as a bond between equals grounded in mutual love and respect. Rather than reflecting the unique, gender-based roles of unions just 50 years ago, most marriages today are based on flexible divisions of labor, companionship, and sexual attraction. These evolving views about marriage have paved the way for gay marriage, acceptable cohabitation, and a variety of lifestyle choices for all love relationships.

In fact, marriage itself is becoming increasingly optional, with more people choosing to delay it or avoid it altogether in favor of living together. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), the median age for marriage in the early 1980s was 25 for men and 22 for women. However in 2011, the median ages for first marriages hit a record high of 29 for men and 27 for women. The Pew report found that couples no longer feel the need to be married to become parents and the options of other lifestyles, such as living alone or living with partners, has contributed to delaying marriage. Most divorced people are choosing to avoid marrying again. Only 29 percent of people who have

been married before say they'd be willing to take another trip to the altar.

So what do these statistics and the changing views about love and marriage have to do with your committed relationship? The important take-away here is that love relationships are no longer defined by convenience and traditional roles. Whether you are married, living with someone, or dating, you have the freedom to create a deeply satisfying bond based on love, sexual attraction, friendship, intimacy, and mutual respect. Being in a committed, intimate relationship *does* lead to a more satisfying life. According to a [Cornell University study](#), people who are in a committed relationship live longer, are happier in general, and tend to accumulate more wealth. The strongest commitments create the most satisfaction.

But if that's the case, why are relationships often so difficult and painful? Why do we argue, belittle, and disengage from the one person we're supposed to love most? We have more freedom than ever to enjoy a healthy, loving relationship, yet we can't seem to manage conflict and stress with our beloved. The very same person whose gaze left you reeling with passion in the beginning is now the one pushing all your buttons and making you crazy.

I find it ironic that we go through extensive training to drive a car and spend years in school preparing for a career, but there's no expected or required training when it comes to this most vital part of our lives—our love relationship. No one teaches us how to be a good partner, how to nurture the health of the relationship, and how to resolve differences in a mature way. We jump in like blind fools, certain that love will conquer all.

If we're lucky, we had good role models in our parents, but even so, our particular relationship has its own nuances, issues, and unsightly bumps. Once the initial infatuation wears off, we are left with few skills to navigate those bumps and maintain the vitality and joy of the connection. Over time, many couples wind up in their separate corners, scowling at each other from a distance. This certainly isn't what we thought would happen when we first stared at our lover across the room and our hearts melted.

All problems in relationships boil down to one thing: a lack of empathic communication.

Whether our concerns relate to money, sex, kids, affection, career, or any of the various reasons we fight or get angry, when we don't communicate our needs and discuss our differences in the spirit of love, things inevitably break down. You've been there. So have I. We are turf-oriented creatures, even with our most intimate partners. We want to protect what's ours—emotionally, psychologically, and physically—often at the expense of those we love most. Intimate, healthy relationships require letting go of some of that turf and recognizing that the other person's needs and feelings are as valid as our own.

Simply living in the same space with another person provides plenty of fodder for frustration and conflict. When you are first in love, the boxers left on the floor are just adorable. The heat turned up to 80 degrees is a darling idea. But eventually, familiarity breeds, if not contempt, plenty of irritation. Add to that the stresses of children, finances, and career—along with the real differences in the way men and women perceive the world—and it's a wonder any of us make it through the first few years of a relationship.

An intimate relationship itself is a living, breathing entity that must be nurtured and cared for daily, above our own individual needs or frustrations. If you want your relationship to work, you *both* must work at your relationship and care for it tenderly. It can't be one-sided, and it can't be neglected. We have to talk about what's bugging us, what we need from each other, and our dreams and disappointments. And we have to listen, really listen to what our beloved is saying so he or she feels heard and understood.

There is no doubt, your marriage or partnership is THE most valuable part of your life. If it's not, it should be. It should come before your work, hobbies, extended family, and—yes—even before your children. As a couple, you are the centerpiece of your family, and if the couple isn't strong, the family isn't strong. Both partners must be committed to putting the relationship as their top life priority. This commitment can't rest on empty words. It must be acknowledged between the two of you and demonstrated in your daily, even hourly, choices and actions to keep the relationship healthy and thriving.

To be good stewards of the relationship, we have to let go of personal needs long enough to heal the relationship before any rifts pull us apart. We can't allow communication to devolve into lashing out, stonewalling, or being right to protect our egos. By exercising some self-control, even when strong feelings make us want to say unspeakable things, we create a safe space for open communication, understanding, and deeper connection.

Says New York-based relationship therapist Harriet Pappenheim, LCSW, [in an article on my blog, Live Bold and Bloom](#).

Primarily, you need to become an expert on your partner. What makes your partner feel safe and secure, above all else? What will upset him/her? What will reassure that person?

Try thinking back to the last time you had some sort of conflict or upset. How did your partner react? What would have soothed him/her? A couple bubble can only exist between people who know each other really, really well. In time, each of you will come to know exactly how to comfort the other, in any kind of situation.

The most successful, intimate relationships involve proactive communication before a conflict ever arises. As stilted or awkward as it might seem, meeting with your spouse or partner on a regular basis to ask questions and learn about each other will protect your relationship from painful altercations, and, even better, it will create a new level of intimacy between you. I use probing questions regularly in my coaching practice to help clients uncover their deeper desires, needs, and fears. A strong question compels us to search within to find the answer, leading to profound moments of self-awareness and personal growth.

Within the context of a relationship, mutual questioning can provide these same benefits, and also allow each partner to participate in the awareness and growth of the other. More important, by mindfully listening to your partner without judgment or anger, you will understand more about his or her motivations, fears, pain, longings, and frustrations. You offer each other a safe space to be fully open and authentic, which ultimately draws you closer together and strengthens the bond of love between you.

## **How to Use These Questions**

If you are reading this book alone, I strongly suggest you involve your partner and read the book together from the beginning. Make this a project the two of you undertake as a team. You both want to enter this work with the specific intention of strengthening and protecting your relationship, in addition to building intimacy and learning more about each other. These questions can be fun, humorous, enlightening, and deeply moving. You'll be surprised at how much more you discover about yourself and about each other.

You also will be challenged to make some personal changes in your behaviors, habits, and words. The questions will reveal unmet needs and behavior change requests from both of you. You will want to discuss these needs and requests and what you are each willing to change or accommodate for the other. There might be needs you can't fulfill or changes you're unwilling to make, and this will require honest and open discussion, so you can mutually arrive at alternative solutions.

There are 20 question topics in the book, each with ten or more related questions and question prompts. Consider working through the topics during the next 20 days, asking each other the questions from one topic per day. You can follow the order the topics are presented, or choose the topic that feels most relevant to what's going on in your relationship at the time. If there are section topics that don't apply to you (for example, the section on parenting wouldn't apply if you don't have children), then feel free to skip over it. However, you still might find the questions and your partner's answers interesting and enlightening.

Both of you should keep a journal to make notes about your partner's responses and your own feelings after you complete the questions. You will also want to write down specific action steps both of you will take if a question prompts an adjustment in attitude, behavior, communication, or values.

When you begin a topic, you will each ask and answer the same question, taking turns as the first person to answer a question. It's often more difficult to be the first one to answer, as you might need time for your true feelings to bubble to the surface—or you might feel reticent to be fully open in your response. Also your partner's answers can influence your responses, so be mindful that your answers reflect your own true feelings and needs.

Your partner's answers or your own reactions might stimulate more questions or conversation between you, which can further develop connection and intimacy. Just be sure you listen intently to your partner's responses without interrupting or getting distracted. Sit close together as you are asking and answering, holding hands or touching. Even if your partner's answer makes you bristle or feel uncomfortable, try hard to simply listen without anger or judgment. Invite your partner to dig deeper and

share more by asking, “Is there more?” once he or she answers the question. Keep asking this until your partner has nothing left to add.

Should a question provoke tension, pain, or anger between the two of you, try to ferret out the emotion behind the negative feelings. Ask your partner directly, “What is the emotion underneath your irritation? What was it about my response that made you feel upset?” In answering this, be careful not to project blame or criticism on your partner, even if you feel he or she is at fault. Speak about your inner feelings, which requires being vulnerable rather than defensive. You might say something like, “When you tell me you need more attention from me, it makes me feel like I’m not good enough and unappreciated for my efforts.” When we acknowledge and understand the emotions behind our partner’s anger or pain, it allows us to be more compassionate and willing to find workable solutions.

Should any of your discussions around these questions become too emotional or difficult to sort through without pain and anger, please seek the support of a trained relationship counselor to help you navigate the issue. Sometimes old wounds and pain from the past are too entrenched to unravel and heal without the help of a therapist. If this is the case, don’t allow this emotional division to languish between you. Put your relationship first by seeking to treat and heal any fissures that could ultimately pull you apart or undermine the happiness of your connection.

One final note: I believe the physical environment in which you ask and answer these questions makes a big difference in how you respond and connect with each other. Don’t undertake this important relationship work while kids are underfoot, dinner is cooking, or the TV is playing in the background. Choose a time when you know you won’t be interrupted, perhaps early in the morning before anyone else awakens or in the evening during a quiet time.

Find a room in your home that feels peaceful and uncluttered without potential distractions or interruptions. Allow yourself an hour to finish all ten questions from one section and to discuss your feelings and reactions. Inform anyone else who lives in the house not to interrupt you during this hour. If necessary, leave the house to go to a quiet restaurant, sit somewhere in nature, or park the car somewhere in a peaceful setting. Consider this sacred time together that not only contributes to your happiness as a couple, but also makes you better parents, friends, and professionals. Your relationship happiness is the linchpin for happiness in all other areas of your life.

## So, are you ready to get started?

Here are a few reminders:

- Grab your journals, and get a glass of water or a cup of tea (try to avoid alcohol as it alters your verbal self-control).
- Find your peaceful spot in the house or elsewhere.
- Flip a coin to see who will be the first one to answer the first question. Then alternate after that. Read the question and the information below the question out loud. Then ask the question again directly to your partner.
- Try not to read ahead to the next questions, but instead focus intently on the question you are asking and answering.
- Sit close to each other so you can touch and look at each other face to face.
- Give each other plenty of time to respond, and as you are listening to your partner answer a question, try not to think ahead about your own answers. Just be fully present for your partner and practice [empathic listening skills](#).

At the end of each section, there is a follow-up prompt inviting you both to make behavior change requests of your partner. If your partner reveals a request for a change from you, discuss and write down specific actions steps you both intend to take and when you intend to take them. Making these changes can take time, as we need repetition and reinforcement to solidify new behaviors. Set up a system of gentle reminders and accountability for each other, and be patient as you both strive to be a better, more attentive, loving partner for the other.



# Section 1: Feeling Loved

## ***1. What specific behaviors and actions from me feel most loving to you?***

Marriage counselor and author of *The 5 Love Languages*, [Gary Chapman](#), believes there are five ways to express love emotionally. “Each person has a primary love language that we must learn to speak if we want that person to feel loved,” says Chapman. These include words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, and physical touch. You can become aware of your love language by considering the actions and words from your partner that fill you with love and gratitude. Or you can notice your complaints to your partner, which reveal where you need more expressions of your love language.

## ***2. How would you like me to verbally express my love?***

If your love language is words of affirmation, verbal expressions are vital to feeling loved. But all of us need to hear words that are loving, tender, sexy, and affirming. Some people feel uncomfortable verbalizing their emotions, but real intimacy creates a safe bubble for the two of you to express your deepest feelings without fear or shame. You might both agree that fewer words are better for the two of you. If you differ here, it will require some compromise and stretching to accommodate each other.

## ***3. What kind of physical touch feels the most loving?***

Touch is our first sense to develop as babies, and it’s the main way of showing love to a baby. We are wired to need touch. Physical affection is essential for the overall happiness and satisfaction of a romantic relationship. It solidifies our bonds as a couple. Studies have even shown that conflict is resolved more easily when there is more affection in the relationship. Some people need and desire more touch than others. In fact, one of you might be highly affectionate while the other requires less touch. Find out from each other the specific kinds of touch (hugging, holding hands, backrubs, etc.) that makes your partner feel loved and cherished.

## ***4. What makes you feel more loving toward me?***

Find out from each other the behaviors, words, and actions you each practice that elicit



feelings of love and affection from your partner. Something as simple as a kind comment, a well-timed smile, or the way your partner makes a cup of coffee for you, can feel like the most generous, beautiful, or admirable gesture. It is often the small things that we appreciate most and that make us feel valued and treasured. Share these with each other, both to clarify them for yourself and to let your partner know what you appreciate about them.

### ***5. How can I ask for more love from you?***

There will be times when one or both of you don't feel loved as much you require or in the way you need to feel it. We want our partner to instinctively know what we need and to offer it without our having to ask. But that isn't always possible or realistic. As close as you might be as a couple, neither of you are mind readers. Sometimes you must ask for what you need. And it's good to ask in a way that is not judgmental, critical, or demeaning. Find out from your partner how you can ask for more love or a different expression of love in a way that inspires him or her to offer more.

### ***6. What might I say or do that would feel unloving to you?***

You both know the obvious words or actions that would feel unloving to your partner. Unkindness, criticism, dishonesty, and indifference will make anyone feel unloved and hurt. Sometimes we say or do things unknowingly that trigger pain and anger in our partner. Perhaps we trigger old wounds from the past or cross a boundary we didn't know existed. In an effort to keep peace, one partner might repress his or her feelings of hurt, but over time, keeping these feelings to oneself can cause resentment. Share with each other what your partner might do now or could do in the future to make you feel unloved.

### ***7. How will I know when you need more love from me?***

Sometimes we need more from our partner, but we aren't really clear what is making us feel unloved, neglected, or taken for granted. Or maybe we feel uncomfortable being direct, so we use passive-aggressive behaviors that reveal our pain or anger. We all turn to these behaviors from time to time to communicate our feelings—whether through pouting, withdrawal, or subtle comments. Examine your own behaviors in the past to see how you might be communicating your need for more love. Share these with your partner so they can recognize and identify them. Of course, direct communication is the best way to let your partner know you need more, but understanding these behaviors in each other opens the door for compassion and communication.

### ***8. How often do you need to hear me say, “I love you”?***

Those three little words are so powerful. For some people, hearing those words on a daily basis is as essential as water in a desert. A verbal expression of your partner’s feelings makes you feel secure, acknowledged, and valued. Other people don’t need to hear it as often. They know through their partner’s actions and presence that they are loved. One of you might feel uncomfortable or silly saying the words regularly, while the other might sprinkle them throughout daily conversation. How often does your partner need to hear them from you? Be willing to offer these words as often as desired.

### ***9. What does unconditional love mean to you?***

Unconditional love is the ability to love the other person as he or she is in their essence. If you have fallen in love with this person and want to build a lasting relationship, then you must view him or her as a unique individual—not as an extension of yourself. But what does this mean in the dynamic of your particular relationship? How do you both view unconditional love, and how do you think it should be expressed within your marriage or connection?

### ***10. How can we rekindle love when we see signs of apathy or distance?***

Apathy and disconnection in the relationship can often creep up on a couple. When life gets busy with work, children, and other distractions, we might spend less time together, communicate less frequently, and feel anger or resentment that stifles intimacy. Maybe you are feeling some of this now. Even if you aren’t, you need to protect your relationship from it. Work together to identify the first signs of distance between you, and talk about a plan for reconnecting should this happen.



**Follow-up:** Are there any behavior adjustments you’d like to request from your partner related to feeling loved? What specific action steps will you both take to help your partner feel more loved? Write these down and determine how and when you will initiate these changes or actions.

## Section 2: Respect and Kindness

### ***11. What specific actions and words make you feel respected?***

What is respect? According to the [Oxford Dictionary](#), respect is “a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements.” When we are shown respect, we feel valued and acknowledged. We particularly want respect from the one person we love the most, whose opinion and regard are so deeply important to us. Feeling respected is different for every individual. What makes your partner feel respected might not mean as much to you. Talk to each other about where you need to feel respect and how your partner can best show you respect.

### ***12. How have you been disrespected in the past, and how did it make you feel?***

Part of understanding our own desires for respect derives from the ways we might have been disrespected in the past. If we are ignored, diminished, teased, or criticized for whom we are, what we value, or what we’ve achieved, we carry wounds that make us bristle when the behavior toward us is repeated even slightly. You can help yourself and your partner understand your need for respect by examining where you’ve lacked it in the past.

### ***13. Am I doing anything now to make you feel disrespected?***

Part of the discussion about respect needs to include any ways in which either of you might make your partner feel disrespected. This might be unconscious and perfectly innocent behavior, but if it causes your partner pain, you need to alter the behavior or language. Discuss this openly with each other and offer your partner a safe space to let you know about any feelings of being disrespected he or she might harbor.

### ***14. Are there any ways in which you feel undeserving of respect?***

We can unconsciously foster an attitude of disrespect from others when we don’t respect ourselves or don’t feel deserving of respect. You can send signals to others, including your spouse or partner, that you don’t value yourself and therefore aren’t worthy of their respect. Do you see yourself in this way? Often these feelings come

from low self-esteem, or perhaps there is a valid reason you've lost respect for yourself. Your partner can offer you the compassion and love to safely reveal your feelings and discuss how to regain self-respect.

***15. How can I support you in feeling more respected in this area?***

When we lack self-esteem and self-respect in some area of our lives, it is immeasurably comforting and reassuring to have someone in our corner, willing to help us regain our footing. Sometimes it takes the tender care of our beloved to help us see our own worthiness. If your spouse or partner is lacking self-respect, find out how you can support efforts to rebuild and maintain it going forward.

***16. What acts of kindness from me mean the most to you?***

You've heard the saying, "It's the smalls things that count." Small acts of kindness often communicate the strongest expressions of love and respect. These small acts add up to make our partners feel appreciated and cherished. Find out from each other which acts of kindness are most valued. Find out if there are any small acts your partner would like from you that you haven't offered before.

***17. How have I unknowingly been less than kind to you?***

We might not mean to wound or neglect each other, but we can say or do things that cause our partner to bristle or feel pain. It's hard to hear that we might have unknowingly wounded our partners, but it's important to address these small paper cuts before they cause deeper wounds or resentments. Gently share any unkindness with each other, and discuss the reasons behind the pain or irritation.

***18. How should I let you know that I feel you're being unkind?***

Often unkind words or actions occur when we're tired, stressed, worried, or distracted. We all have those moments, no matter how hard we try to be loving and kind all the time. On those occasions, it's hard to be corrected or reminded of unkind behaviors. How would you like your spouse or partner to let you know you are acting in an unkind way or speaking unkindly so that you can avoid a conflict or defensive feelings?

***19. Do you see me as a kind person to you and others?***

Kindness is such an important trait to foster, not only toward your partner but also with anyone you encounter. It isn't hard to speak with kindness or to offer small acts of kindness daily. Unfortunately, in this busy, competitive, and demanding world,