Can an unhealthy relationship become healthy? [1]

Dear Alice,

Is it possible to change an unhealthy relationship to a healthy relationship and if so, how?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Whoever said relationships take work wasn't kidding. Without attention, the occasional lovers' quarrel can easily drag a relationship downhill into constant bickering, or even worse, physical violence. Change is possible, but for many couples, it's an uphill battle to develop healthier habits.

For starters, you may want to check out Healthy versus unhealthy relationships [2] in the Go Ask Alice! archives. In a nutshell, a healthy relationship makes you feel good about yourself, your partner, and life in general. In contrast, an unhealthy relationship leaves you feeling unhappy, unsafe, or scared about the future.

Sometimes the line between feeling good and feeling bad when you're with someone is unclear. Hence the saying, "I love you, but you drive me crazy!" Rather than labeling partnerships as simply "good" or "bad," it may be helpful to picture a scale ranging from very healthy to very unhealthy. In reality, lots of relationships may fall somewhere in the middle. Just like individual people, all relationships have strengths and challenges. For example, you and your sweetie may get along swell between the sheets, but when it's time to do laundry, conflict erupts. Oftentimes, both partners play a part in escalating disagreements. The capacity for change depends on several factors, including the severity of the problem(s) and the commitment of both parties to making progress.

The more unhealthy a relationship is, the more difficult it can be to change for the better. At one extreme, several studies have looked at ways to address physical violence between couples. Unfortunately, batterer intervention programs have not been very effective in replacing abuse with healthier coping skills. In less severe situations where the disagreement isn't physical, good communication and conflict resolution skills are still key.

A good first step towards a healthier relationship is to identify your conflict management and
resolution style.” When conflict is brewing, how do you react? Do you…

- Become aggressive, or alternatively, defensive?
- Adopt a "win - lose" perspective?
- Blame your partner?
- Avoid the conflict at all costs?
- Agree with your partner to avoid conflict?
- Change the subject?

List adapted from the article Conflict Resolution Skills [3] from Helpguide.org.

Once you are more aware of your default disposition, you can take steps to respond more constructively instead of just reacting in the heat of the moment. The next time trouble arises, try to listen to your partner's concerns, and then share your own perspective in a sensitive way.

Of course, revamping your communication style is often easier said than done. You and your partner may benefit from some expert advice in the form of individual or couples counseling. If you’re a college student, you might check to see if your campus offers these services. Additionally, these resources may also prove helpful:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline [4] — call 1.800.799SAFE (7233) or 1.800.787.3224 for TTY
- National Association of Social Workers, Inc. [5] — provides referrals to social workers and services
- American Psychological Association [6] — offers a practice directory for referrals to psychological services

Building a healthy relationship takes skill and determination from both partners, but it can be done. Seeking help from a counselor or couples therapy increases the chance that your relationship will move onward and upward!

Alice!
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Related questions

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Resources

Sexual Violence Response & Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center [14]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [15]