

# BUILDING TRUST

## *In A Relationship*



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## *Does Your Relationship Lack TRUST?*

Relationships can be challenging when there is not a trusting foundation. Maybe you wish you could trust your partner more. Or maybe you want your partner to trust you more. Some people worry about the interactions their partners have with people of the opposite gender. Maybe you and your spouse question what the other is doing when you are not together. Maybe you find yourself waiting until your partner has left the room or fallen asleep so that you can check his/her phone.

Maybe you don't question your partner's interactions with others as much as you worry about how s/he spends money or parents the kids. Maybe your partner monitors credit card statements to ensure you're not spending too much. Perhaps you feel the need to protect your children from what you perceive to be harsh reactions. Do you worry what s/he will say to your children or what kind of punishment s/he will give when upset?

Trust is vital when you want to share your emotions and thoughts. Perhaps you worry that your partner will not respect how you feel when you share something personal. Maybe s/he makes fun of or minimizes your feelings. Sharing your feelings with your partner puts you in a vulnerable place. This can be the case especially with regards to intimacy in the relationship. Maybe it's hard to talk about your needs because you worry your partner will not listen.

Mutual trust is the foundation in every solid relationship. For example, you need to be able to trust your partner with how money is spent, how one raises the kids, trust whether there's respect for the relationship boundaries, respect for feelings and more. Building trust in a relationship can be a very difficult process, especially if something has happened to break that trust. The good news is that, with help and guidance, two willing partners can build and repair lasting trust.

## **Are You Ready to Build Trust in Your Relationship?**

The following tips can help you feel stable, supported and secure.

## ***1. Ask Yourself If You Are Capable Of Trusting Your Partner***

First and foremost, it is very important to ask yourself whether or not you are willing and able to trust your partner. Often times, fear can get in the way of trust. Your past experiences, either with your current partner or from childhood experiences, have a great impact when building trust. It is important to notice the role your emotions play in this process, as they can lead you in an unintended direction. Sometimes, past hurts need to be worked out before you can fully feel safe and secure with someone. If you want to trust but find yourself waging an internal war, then a professional therapist can help you examine these complicated emotions. You may need to work through your past hurts before you are able to move forward in trusting your partner. It will be good to figure this out before embarking on these steps to save you and your partner some unnecessary heartache.

## ***2. Take Responsibility For Your Actions***

To create and maintain trust in the relationship, both partners must accept responsibility for wrongs. It is also essential that you respect one another's feelings. This includes situations in which you may not believe you did anything wrong.

If your partner felt disrespected by you in some way, it is crucial for you to validate her/his perspective, apologize for your actions and agree to make changes you both agree on. This can help your partner build or maintain trust for you with his/her feelings. Identifying something you both could have done differently will help ensure that you both are comfortable sharing feelings and will want to move toward resolving the tense situation. If you are stuck in your belief that you did not do anything wrong, then ask your partner what upset him/her about your actions. While you may not like what you hear, this will enlighten you to better understand how your actions impact your partner's feelings. If you still can not come up with something you can do differently, then consider that you both may need to communicate better with each other.

## ***3. Let Go of Grudges***

Think about what you want with your relationship. Do you want the relationship to flourish and grow? What kind of relationship do you want to have? What kind of partner do you want to be? Give a lot of thought to these questions, as they will likely help you move forward in figuring out what your values are for yourself, what kind of partner you want to be and how you want to be viewed by your partner when relating to him/her.

When partners hold onto grudges in a relationship, they tend to bring up their unresolved situation frequently, often in a disrespectful manner. Your partner needs to trust that you can let go of past mistakes so s/he feels safe when s/he inevitably makes mistakes in the future. Everyone makes mistakes and wants to be forgiven.

Sometimes, we think issues are resolved and they are not. It would be unfair for you or your partner to continuously bring up a past hurt. It is true that the bigger hurts take more work to resolve. Once a hurt has been processed between the two of you, you need to lay it to rest. When you keep past resentments and throw them back to the person who hurt you, you only drive that person away from you.

If this task is too difficult, then the support of a therapist can help. In therapy, you can communicate your pain in a way that will help you get the support you need from your partner, let go of grudges and work through your pain.

## ***4. Set Healthy Boundaries***

Both partners need to establish appropriate boundaries that they both can agree on in order to ensure that you both feel respected. Agreeing on healthy boundaries will ensure that both partners understand limits of the relationship. Boundaries are simply an understanding of what each partner is comfortable with and what they are not. They prevent unnecessary arguments from happening.

Examples of boundaries that may need to be established include: what is appropriate in interactions with others of the opposite gender, the limit of money to spend without needing an agreement or when is it okay to not inform your partner of something with your work schedule or your children's behaviors, or more.

Having boundaries that both of you agree to and consistently respect will prevent disputes and build trust. You and your partner can create healthy boundaries through discussion. Sometimes, this process may take multiple discussions. Once you and your partner reach a resolution and set boundaries, then it is crucial for both partners to respect them consistently. If you feel the need for an exception, it is important that you discuss this with your partner first. Should one partner fail to respect the agreed upon boundaries, trust will be compromised.

In therapy, I discuss healthy boundaries and help couples navigate them. I often help couples recognize that perhaps they have not discussed or updated their boundaries and help them decide what will work for them. Checking in on boundaries and continuing to grow together is key to a trusting relationship.

## ***5. Establish Respectful Communication Dynamics***

In order to create trust in your relationship, both partners need to speak respectfully toward one other, even during times of conflict and discussion of uncomfortable topics. In addition, each partner needs to be completely open and honest, even if the truth makes one uncomfortable or if feelings get hurt. By showing respect during these times, you and your partner can allow each other to trust that your feelings will be respected. Then, you both can open up fully with your emotions. Without this, a break down in communication and trust will likely occur.

This aspect can be particularly difficult for couples when discussing sensitive topics such as parenting, intimacy struggles, partner's flirtations or finances. By showing respect to your partner, you can create a safe environment for your partner to share. S/he will trust you and your responses and therefore allow him/herself to be completely vulnerable with you in every way.

This is often a focus of therapy with couples. Having an objective third party who is trained in this area can be invaluable when trying to establish respectful communication dynamics in a relationship.

### **Case Example**

Consider the following example of a relationship dynamic where trust has been established through respect.:

This couple\* consists of a husband and wife who have been married for over 20 years. They have raised children together and are now empty nesters. Now that it is just them in the house, they have to decide how to connect again without the kids as a distraction from their relationship. They have since discovered that the wife does not trust her husband with regards to her feelings. She notices that she withdraws from him in fear that he will minimize his interactions with other women, even though they cause his wife pain. She does not believe that he has had an affair, but the way he jokes around is uncomfortable for her. When she has opened up to him in the past, she felt as though he would minimize his role, assign blame to her and make her feel as though she was insecure.

***\*Please note:***

*This example is not from a real-life, specific couple. It is strictly an example of what couples may experience. This example is only designed to help you better understand how this process may help you and your relationship.*

In this example, there are a couple of trust issues to address, including setting mutually agreed upon boundaries and taking responsibility for one's own actions. I would need to assess whether or not other issues are a factor. As this fictitious couple's therapist, I

would want to hear both partners discuss the history of their relationship, when the breakdown of trust occurred and how they'd like to see the relationship develop and grow.

Assuming both partners want the relationship to flourish, I would help each partner express him/herself respectfully and to support his/her partner. Owning his/her own role will allow each partner to better understand how his/her actions impact his/her partner. I would help both people to express concerns, support their partner's feelings and own what they can do differently. My style tends to be direct and yet understanding in nature, which can be helpful if discussions become passionate.

When discussing the relationship boundaries, we would likely have to look at the level of intimacy as well. Perhaps while raising their kids, the couple lost sight of their connection and need to re-establish what that looks like. Helping them re-connect can help smooth the discussions around boundaries with others of the opposite gender. Both partners would have the opportunity to share what their desires are for themselves and for their relationship going forward.

Maybe you identify with the wife. Try to imagine what would happen if you told your husband the truth about his interactions with others. Now, try to place yourself in his shoes. In order to build trust, you would need to be willing to support his concerns. It's possible that you both could work this out on your own to build trust. It's also possible that you both may need a little extra support to avoid bumps in the road.

### **Therapy Can Help You Build Trust**

Never give up on yourself or your partner. If you both want the relationship, then all the work put into it will be worth it in the end. See if you can try these steps to make movement toward growth in your relationship. You are strong and capable of trusting others! Believe it, and it can happen. If you cannot, then support is available. Don't hesitate to call any longer.

I have worked with many couples since 2003. Trust is a very common issue. When working with couples, I first assess what the struggles are within the relationship. If trust is of concern, then we will figure what aspects of trust need to be addressed. If you do not feel safe to share openly and honestly with your partner because of how s/he often reacts to you or others, then we work on that. If you and your partner have weak boundaries between the two of you, then I strive to help you agree on appropriate boundaries.

In sessions, we will identify specific areas of concern, then come up with what will work for your relationship. As an objective trained professional, I will point out times when boundaries are not being respected, or when partners are not respecting each other. I will help foster an environment where both parties can share their true feelings, and I will help partners respond in a manner that builds trust. Pointing out areas to work on helps you establish trust with me, and in turn helps you feel safe to talk in my office. Together, we will develop a plan to help you continue this healthy dynamic when you leave my office

as well. You can feel equipped to tackle your struggles with a doable plan to continue progress made in sessions.

I will strive to help both partners feel they can speak openly and honestly. When each person is able to trust, takes personal responsibility, lets go of past grudges, communicates respectfully, and commits to mutually agreed upon relationship boundaries, trust happens!

If you would like help in going through this process, or have general questions about my practice, feel free to contact me at (703) 554-2882. I am happy to provide a free 15-minute phone consultation to go over your specific situation and how I may be able to help in your journey.

**Michelle Bogdan, LCSW graduated with her Master's in Social Work (MSW) with an academic concentration in Alcohol and Other Drugs in 2003 from the University of Buffalo, in Buffalo, New York. Prior to earning her MSW she worked in the Human Services field with Severely Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents. While her private practice, MLB Therapy, PLLC, opened in 2012, she has been providing therapy since 2003.**