



Five Questions for a New Direction *How to Improve Your Relationship*

by Elizabeth J. Agnew

Have you ever been in that fork in the road of a relationship where you have to decide if it's worth it to continue working at the relationship or to call it quits? I can't help you make that decision, but if you decide to continue working at it, I can help you turn in a new direction and eliminate future doubt. Maybe it's not even a question of breaking up or staying together, maybe you just need to – at the risk of sounding cliché – rekindle the flame.

Once you and your partner have decided to try to work through the falling-out, or are not sure but are leaning towards staying together, there are five questions you can each answer to help start the journey off on the right foot. Or if it's one of those unhealthy situations where neither of you really wants to talk about it and if you hadn't read this article you would have just let your differences simmer until they boiled up again, working through the questions together forces you to face the issues at hand and eliminate the apprehension of a future episode. Deepen your relationship with a new level of commitment and appreciation.

When you've both agreed to spend the two hours it will take to do this exercise, print out the questions and spend about one hour filling out the answers *separately*. Be honest, list anything that comes to mind, and try to think in general, big-picture terms.

1. I am choosing to work on my relationship with you because:

This first question sets the stage for the exercise and reminds you of the reasons that you were initially attracted to your partner. It highlights the positive aspects that you like about the other person, and lays the foundation for why you're taking the effort now to improve your situation. It's a statement of willingness, showing that this effort is a choice and that no one is dragging you along.

2. I want a relationship that is:

Here is where you define your ideal relationship. This is your dream list for what you're looking for. How do you want the relationship to make you feel? How much time do you want to devote to it? What benefits do you see it bringing to your life? Try to think not of your current relationship – forget about that for a minute and think idealistically. For example, "I want a relationship that feels safe; a place where I don't have to hide or be ashamed of my weaknesses."

3. In order to get this with you I am willing to be more:

This is the heart of it all. Writing down what *you* can do differently to get what you want in a relationship is a way of accepting responsibility that you are half of the problem and a big part of the solution. This is the idea that what you put in is what you get out. There's no more complaining about how the relationship is lacking here or there because of your partner. No blaming allowed. All you need to say is 2. what you want and 3. what you're willing to do differently to get it. For the example above, one thing you might list if you wanted a safe relationship is to be more supportive of your partner's weaknesses. You'll find that the solution to a lot of what you want is to be more that way yourself.

4. Wish list – I would like a partner who:

Now let's move the focus from the relationship, or the partner dynamic, to the ideal person you would like to share your life with. Again, try to forget about your current partner and think in idealistic terms. Do not use this as an opportunity to make jabs at your current partner. For example, if you think your current partner watches too much TV, it would *not* be helpful to list "I would like a partner who watches less TV." Try to put things in a positive light, one that does not specifically reflect who you're with. For the example above, you might say "I would like a partner who enjoys the outdoors."

5. For each of my wish list items above, what can I do to help make this happen with my current partner?

Be careful here, the goal is not to change your partner. Instead, it is again to accept responsibility for the fact that your behavior may be playing a part in your partner's behavior – the system is intertwined. For example, if you said in Question 4 that you wanted a partner who had a positive attitude, and your current partner seems complain a lot and be negative all of the time, something you might list here is "encourage the times when my partner is positive" or "maintain a positive attitude myself even if they start to get down."

Once you've each completed answering the questions, agree to spend one hour in a quiet place with no interruptions where you can share your answers. Remind yourself as you listen to your partner's answers that whatever they wrote is okay. It's about their desires, which you're ultimately willing to support. Don't let your ego get in the way here. I recommend alternating sharing answers in the following question groups: 1, then 2 and 3, then 4 and 5.

Question pairs 2 and 3, and 4 and 5 are obviously related – it probably takes a certain type of person to make the match that would give you the relationship you want. Once you've finished your worksheet, you may see some overlap. After reviewing the worksheet, summarize the bulk of what you're seeing by each committing to three behaviors that you are willing (key word) to change.

The overall goal of this worksheet is to take responsibility for how you're showing up in the relationship. At this fork in the road, the point is not to tell your partner what they should change, but what you can contribute to make the situation better. So, to recap: 1. Why bother? 2. What do you want in a relationship? 3. What are you willing to do to get it? 4. What do you want in a partner? 5. What are you willing to change about your behavior to support things you want from your partner?

It isn't enough to have read this article; you must print out the questions, fill out the answers, talk it over, and commit to three behavior changes. The beauty is that you send a profound message to your partner simply by taking the time and effort to go through the process.

Scott Peck defines love as the willingness to extend yourself for the spiritual growth of another. Consciously choosing to respond differently in the future to what's been messing things up in the past is an act of true love. By changing yourself, you will inevitably see positive transformations in your partner and the relationship.



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Five Questions Worksheet

Spend 2 Hours Improving Your Relationship

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Instructions: Print this out and write in your answers. Give yourself an hour to complete. List anything here that comes to mind and try to think in general terms of your whole life, not just of the person you're currently with. When finished, plan 1 hour together in a quiet place with no interruptions to review your answers.

1. I am choosing to work on my relationship with you (as opposed to breaking up) because:

2. I want a relationship that is: (or What do I want to get out of having a relationship?)

3. In order to get this with you I am willing to be more:

There is no blaming or accusing. Each person takes responsibility for what they want.

4. Wish list: I would like a partner who:

It's important here to be idealistic and general because it's not about the person you're with now. Try to think of who you see yourself with in 10 years.

5. For each of my wish list items in 4, above, what can I do to help make this happen with my current partner?

You may want to answer 4 and 5 in two side-by-side columns, unless the answers to 5 are more general and cover multiple items from 4.
