



# getting on better

**Good relationships are central  
to feelings of wellbeing.**

This material was produced as part of the Ultra-brief intervention study (Stress in Primary Care).

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*Ultra-brief intervention patient materials: Getting on Better.*

## Getting on better

Good relationships are central to wellbeing.

Is my relationship satisfying?

When I am with the person:

- I usually feel relaxed
- I can calmly discuss issues like money, parenting family matters and housework
- I can talk to them about important issues
- I mostly say kind things to them
- I feel hopeful when I think about our future together
- I feel happy with our sexual relationship
- We have fun times together
- I have respect for them
- I hardly ever feel they put me down
- I trust them
- I usually feel close to them

Did you answer “no” to any of these statements. Then this booklet is for you.

## What not to do:

- Criticise
- Take no responsibility for your part of the problem
- Show contempt or disrespect (rolling your eyes is a sign of contempt)
- Stonewall (refuse to talk)
- Withdraw (keep away, sulk)
- Demand
- Threaten
- Nag

## Work on changing yourself, not others

When we are unhappy with someone, we often wish they would change. If they don't, we can get angry and sad and start pulling away from them.

The good news is that we can improve our relationships by accepting the other person and changing our own behaviour.

While all the ideas below can be useful in close relationships, many can also help in other relationships, such as with workmates.



## So what can I do to improve things?

Here are some things you could try:

### Say something nice

This is a great place to start. Start noticing the good. Good relationships have five positive experiences for every negative one. Telling someone the little things that please you encourages them and lets them know you noticed and care for them. For example, 'I really like the way you always ring me when you are going to be home late'.

You can also **do** something nice for them.

### Listen actively

Be fully present. Look at the person, give them your full attention, nod your head, say 'uh-huh' and check that you've understood what they've said (rather than trying to solve their problem). For example, say 'You're really worried that you will lose your job' rather than 'You should front up to the boss and ask whether you might lose your job'.

### Turn towards not away

When your partner wants to talk or spend time with you, don't ignore it. Turning towards your partner will get some good feelings in the relationship 'bank', that will help see you through times of conflict.

### Build closeness

Take the time and effort to know what matters to your partner. Know how strong to make their coffee and what they're scared of hearing when the phone rings late at night. Know about their hope of promotion and their private dream to do a triathlon. Your partner will know that you are interested in them and their world.

## Be clear about what you'd like

Be polite and friendly, and say what you'd like them to do. For example, 'Can you please put the butter back in the fridge after you have used it. I'd really appreciate that'. Don't forget to notice the behaviour next time and thank the person if they do what you asked. Remember that people can't read your mind.

## How to talk about negative feelings

If we avoid big issues all the time, it can lead to resentment and cause problems. Sometimes, we need to tell the other person how we're feeling. But it doesn't have to end in an argument. Look at the person (without glaring or standing over them), speak calmly, tell them how you feel and suggest how this might be resolved. Don't blame, threaten or nag.

## Problem solve

This is a structured way to deal with problems in your life

- Get clear on the problem and your goal
- Brainstorm ideas of how to deal with it, (don't 'knock' any ideas at this stage)
- Look at the pros and cons of each idea
- Choose the best idea (remember there is usually no perfect solution!)
- Work out what you have to do to carry out your chosen idea
- Put the plan into action
- If your plan doesn't work, start at the top again

*Brian and Tyla had a big mortgage. They had not been planning to have children for a few years, but Tyla got pregnant and they wanted to keep the baby. They were both feeling stressed about the situation and so they sat down to try problem solving.*

**Problem:** Big mortgage, Tyla stopping work for a while.

**Goal:** Keep the house, but not have baby in childcare until at least 12 months old.

**Ideas:** they came up with:

- See bank manager to restructure mortgage
- Approach family/friend to help with childcare so that Tyla can work part time
- Set really tight budget so as to save before baby comes
- Ask family/friends for pre-loved baby gear
- Brian approach boss about working overtime
- Tyla start a small business she can run from home
- Take in a boarder
- Borrow money from whānau/family

*Brian and Tyla talked through the pros and cons of the different ideas and decided to try several. Brian would see if he could work a bit of overtime. They would budget and save hard until baby was born. Tyla would approach her boss about returning to part time work after three months and ask Aunt Mary if she could look after baby at that time.*

**However, it is also important to accept that some problems are not so easily solved, like chronic illness, or personality differences.**

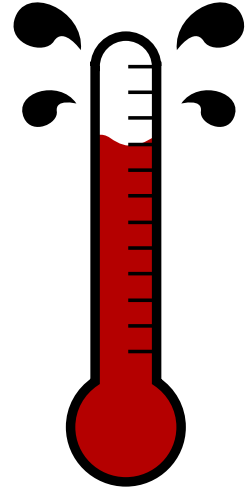
## Manage your anger

It's not cool to lose it.

Temper tantrums are for kids, not grown-ups.

Angry feelings are common in relationships and are not bad in themselves. They help us speak up about important things. But anger is harmful if it comes out in aggressive ways that are hurtful to others.

Aggression includes getting into someone's space, staring them out, using a loud or sarcastic voice, finger pointing, threats, put-downs, sexist or racist remarks, breaking things, or physical violence. You can learn to stop being aggressive.



### What's in it for me?

#### Respect:

- The self-respect you earn when you stay in control and use your strength and skill to handle a tough situation.
- The respect of your friends and family/whānau who start to realise you are stronger than they thought.

### Know the signs

Notice when you are getting angry. Common signs are a thumping heart, heavy breathing, feeling tense and hot.

Signs I am getting angry: \_\_\_\_\_

Once you know the signs, you can get your anger under control before reaching boiling point.



## Know your triggers

Are you more likely to get angry when you are tired or stressed? When you have been drinking or using drugs? When you are reminded of something from the past? Something your boyfriend or your wife always says? Bad drivers on the road? Once you know your triggers, you can watch out for signs that you are getting angry and have a plan to manage it.

*(This could include getting some rest, using stress management strategies, getting some exercise, drinking less, or hanging out with different friends).*

My triggers: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My plan: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Escape Hatches

### When you notice that you are getting angry, you can:

- Take time out. Leave the situation, to let your anger cool down. Make sure you explain that you are taking time out and that you will come back and talk about it when you have calmed down. Otherwise it will look as though you're stone-walling or withdrawing. Avoid drinking or driving during this time.

#### ~ It's strong to walk away

- Then go back and talk. Use 'I feel..' statements, instead of "You made me feel..'. Stick to talking about the situation and behaviours right now that are bothering you. Don't put the other person down. For example 'I'm annoyed that you bought the dog without talking to me about it first'
- Do things to calm down. Relax your shoulders and breathe slowly; take a few steps backwards; take a walk or do something that helps you unwind, for example going for a run or going fishing.
- Distract yourself for example, reading, watching TV, count to ten or imagine a peaceful scene.
- Change the subject.
- Sit down. It's a lot harder to get into trouble when you are sitting down.

- Smile: Make yourself smile and the aggro goes down.
- Try looking at things from the other person's point of view. What is important to them? Might there be another reason for their behaviour?
- Remind yourself not to take things personally and that you don't need to prove yourself.
- Think about whether you are **really** angry, or actually hurt, scared or ashamed. Pay attention to these feelings in yourself. An angry response is not your only option. You could say "I feel really hurt when you say that".

### If you are having an argument:

#### 'Rules for fair fighting'

- Stick to the issue.
- Don't over-generalize (*You **always** complain; you **never** listen to me*).
- No name-calling (*You're stupid, childish...*).
- Use 'I' statements *I'm furious* rather than *You make me wild*.
- Avoid going for people's sore points. Hitting where it hurts just adds to the pain, hurt and anger.
- Do not raise your voice or use threats (verbal or physical). They just cause more anger and fear.

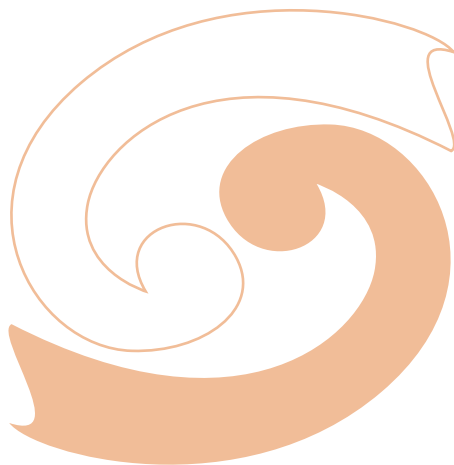
*You are strong enough to keep your temper.*

## Violence is not OK, ever.

### Violence is a Choice

Violence is used to make someone do something they don't want to do. Violence is not just physical. It includes put-downs, criticisms, humiliation, pressure to have sex, twisting of words or playing mind games.

If you are being threatened or hit, you should seriously consider leaving home or asking your partner to leave. You can contact the police to get a protection order under the Domestic Violence Act. Your personal safety is more important than the relationship. If children are involved, you need to make sure they are safe. Violence is a sign that your relationship is in big trouble. It's not likely to stop – it's likely to happen more often and get worse.



**He moana pukepuke e ekengia e te waka.**

*A rough sea can still be navigated.*

## Assertiveness

Assertiveness is a way of clearly letting someone know what you feel, want or need, while respecting what the other person feels, wants and needs.

It's not a guarantee that you will get what you want, but it does let the other person know clearly what your feelings are. Sometimes you might need to state your position a number of times.

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ (for example, hurt, angry, sad, anxious)

When you \_\_\_\_\_ (describe behaviour clearly)

I would rather \_\_\_\_\_ (describe behaviour)

I would like that because \_\_\_\_\_ (say what would be good about that)

Avoid put-downs. Describe exactly what you want them to do, rather than make general statements. Use a calm, friendly tone of voice. Don't stand over people or glare at them. You can work out beforehand what you want to say, or practice in front of the mirror or with a friend.

Andy didn't like going to his partner's after-work drinks. He would end up sitting on his own for most of the evening while his partner spent time with her work mates. Instead of sulking or having a go at her, he decided to be assertive. He picked a time when she was not tired or busy...

*I felt a bit lonely when you spent a lot of time talking to your workmates, but not to me. It would have been more fun if you brought me into the group more, or came and sat with me for a while...that would be a lot more enjoyable for me.*

Remember, you have a right to your feelings and opinions. You are just as important as other people (and they are just as important as you).

Assertiveness is not about winning. It is about coming away knowing you said what you wanted to say.

**You have the right to:**

- Have an opinion
- Express your feelings, preferences and needs
- Say no
- Disagree
- Change your mind

Kia Kaha

Be Strong

*Man is born to live and not to prepare to live*  
– Boris Pasternak



## Think twice

It is easy to jump to the wrong conclusions about why other people do things or what they mean. Our ideas are very powerful, because we believe them. Wrong conclusions cause a lot of distress and distance in relationships.



## Take 1

*Manu asked Annie to vacuum more often.*

*Annie assumed that Manu thought Annie was lazy for not doing it often enough. Annie became angry, telling Manu he was obsessed with housework and that he was a useless cook.*

*Manu and Annie both felt hurt and angry. They didn't talk for the rest of the day.*

*In fact, Manu was having trouble with his asthma and thought it would help if the house could be vacuumed more often.*

- When you think you know what's going on in someone else's head, stop and ask yourself – could there be a different explanation?
- If in doubt, check it out.
- Remember, we can't read other people's minds (and they can't read ours, either).

## Take 2:

*Manu asked Annie to vacuum more often. Annie noticed she was feeling hurt and angry.*

*She realised she had jumped to the conclusion that Manu thought she was lazy.*

*She thought about other reasons for him asking. Maybe they just had different ideas about how often the house needed to be vacuumed. Or maybe Manu's asthma was playing up.*

*She remembered that Manu had not actually said she was lazy and that Manu often said how much he appreciated her hard work running their business.*

*Annie decided to check it out. She asked Manu how come he wanted the vacuuming done more often.*

## What now?

You might think that the ideas in this booklet won't work for you. But you won't know unless you give them a try.

Relationships need work if they are to be satisfying.

It takes time to change patterns and it is not easy. You might feel uncomfortable as you try new behaviours. People may resist the changes you are making, at first.

Keep this booklet where you can find it, so you can flick through for reminders.





## Useful websites and phone lines:

**Relationships Aotearoa** [relationshipsotearoa.org.nz](http://relationshipsotearoa.org.nz)  
Ph 04 385 1729, Level 5, 61-63 Taranaki Street, Wellington

**National Network of Stopping Violence** [nnsvs.org.nz](http://nnsvs.org.nz)  
Te Kupenga Whakaoti Mahi Putunga  
Ph 04 802 5402, email [info@nnsvs.org.nz](mailto:info@nnsvs.org.nz)

**Wellington Ending Abuse and Violence (WEAV)** [weav.org.nz](http://weav.org.nz)  
Ph (04) 914 0871

**Women's Refuge** [womensrefuge.org.nz](http://womensrefuge.org.nz)  
Crisisline 0800 733 843, email [info@refuge.org.nz](mailto:info@refuge.org.nz)

**Parent Help Wellington** [parenthelp.org.nz](http://parenthelp.org.nz)  
Ph (04) 499 9994 or 0800 568 856, email [parenthelp@xtra.co.nz](mailto:parenthelp@xtra.co.nz)  
2 Lukes Lane Wellington.  
Provides 24 hour confidential telephone support, counselling for individuals and families, parenting skills programmes & anger change for women courses

**Catholic Social Services**  
152 Brougham Street, Mt Victoria  
Ph (04) 3858 5642, email [staff@wn-catholicsocialservices.org.nz](mailto:staff@wn-catholicsocialservices.org.nz)  
Offers social work, budget advice and counselling for family problems for people from many religious and cultural backgrounds. Programmes include Parenting Through Separation, Living Without Violence and The Young Men's programme

**Presbyterian Support Services**  
[ps.org.nz](http://ps.org.nz)  
Provides services to people who are elderly or who have disabilities and education and support programmes for fathers

**Wellington City Mission** [wellingtoncitymission.org.nz](http://wellingtoncitymission.org.nz)  
Ph (04) 380 1829  
Provides support for elderly people living at home and young and solo parent families

**Budgeting** [familybudgeting.org.nz](http://familybudgeting.org.nz)  
Ph 0508 BUDGETLINE

## Books:

Many of these are available through the public library.

*The Relationship Cure: A 5 step guide to strengthening your marriage, family and friendships.* Gottman, J. (2001)

*The 7 principles for Making Marriage Work.* Gottman, J. (1999).

*Love in the Real World: Starting and keeping close relationships* Pritchard, R. (2002).

*How Money Comes Between Us: Common family problems and creative solutions.* Pritchard, R. (1999).

*Couple Skills: Making your relationship work.* McKay, M. (1994).

*Manhood: An action plan for changing men's lives.* Biddulph, S. (1995).

*Before your Teenagers Drive you Crazy, Read This.* Latta, N. (2008).

*Messages: The communication skills book.* McKay, M. (2009).

*When Anger Hurts: Quietening the storm within.* (2nd edition). McKay, M., Rogers, P. & McKay, J. (2003).

*The Anger Control Workbook.* Matthew McKay, M. (2000).

*Staying in Love: The top secrets of great relationships.* Salisbury, R. (2009)

*When Anger Hurts your Relationship: 10 simple solutions for couples who fight.* Matthew McKay (2001).

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