

# How to Improve Your Relationships, Part 2



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# How to Improve Your Relationships, Part 2

Welcome to the *Perfectionist Professional Woman* podcast. This is Episode 18, “How to Improve Your Relationships, Part 2.”

I’m Keri Martinez. I’m a wife and mother of three children and three bonus children. I’m also a certified life coach and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For a good portion of my life, I equated perfection with happiness and success. I thought that striving to *be* perfect and *do* things perfectly was the key to feeling happy and to being successful. I’ve since come to realize that perfection *isn’t* necessary to achieve either one of those--quite the opposite, in fact--and that has made such a difference in how I think, feel, and experience life. So if you’re a professional woman and you’d like to know how to release perfectionism so you can trade self-doubt for self-confidence, stop beating yourself up, and start enjoying your life more, then come with me. Let’s do this together.

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Hello everybody. Welcome or welcome back!

I feel like everybody says stuff like this, but I really cannot believe it’s already the middle of June! We are halfway through 2023. I feel like it was just Christmas, and now my kids are out of school for the summer. What is happening?

Anyway, this week is a continuation of last week’s episode on how to improve your relationships, and I originally thought about including this content in last week’s episode, but I decided it was big enough and important enough to warrant its own episode, so here we are.

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Before we get started with that, let's do a quick recap of the three concepts I shared last week that you can use to shift your thinking about and improve your relationships.

First was the idea that a relationship, at its most basic level, is your thoughts about another person. Your thoughts can be shaped by external factors like the length of time you've known the other person, how much you know about the other person, how they act, and so on; but your thoughts about another person are, like *all* thoughts, optional. Which means you can change a relationship by just changing your thoughts about the other person.

The second concept was emotional childhood and emotional adulthood. Emotional childhood is relegating the responsibility for your emotions to other people and other things, and emotional adulthood is taking responsibility for your own emotions. You take responsibility for your own emotions and live in emotional adulthood when you acknowledge that your feelings come from your thoughts, not from anything or anyone else.

Lastly, I talked about thinking on purpose, and that is examining your thoughts and consciously choosing what you want to think. It's considering if your thoughts are serving you, and if not, choosing to think something else that will serve you better. In terms of improving your relationships and living in emotional adulthood, it's examining what you think about people you're in relationship with, and choosing, on purpose, thoughts that will serve you to think about them.

OK. What I want to teach you about today relates to emotional childhood and emotional adulthood and it is the concept of manuals. Manuals are the collection of do's and don'ts we have for other humans. They're the unwritten,

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usually unspoken, rules and expectations we have for how other people are supposed to act. For example, my husband should treat me with love and respect. He shouldn't hit or abuse me or our children. He should work so he can help provide for our family, and he shouldn't spend more than a certain amount without us talking about it first with me. He should go to church with me each week and help teach our children gospel principles, and he shouldn't gamble, drink, carouse or look at pornography. Now similarly, I have expectations for how my children should and shouldn't behave. We all do this, and we do it not only for spouses and kids, but also for friends, coworkers, neighbors, civic leaders, everyone. And it's not a problem that we do this...until it is.

Let's go back to my manual for my husband. You may agree with me on some or all of those rules. Maybe some of them just seem like common sense to you. Like, of course husbands shouldn't hit or cheat on their wives! Of course they should be respectful and loving! All husbands should behave that way!

The thing is, there are people in the world who don't agree with those rules, who have different rules in their own manuals. Don't get me wrong – there are lots of people who *do* agree with those rules, I might even be able to say the majority of people do, but not everyone does. I guarantee there are people (men and women) who think it's fine for husbands to hit or cheat on their wives. There are people in this world who think husbands should be able to drink and spend whatever they want without first discussing it with their spouse. There are people who think it's not a problem for husbands to gamble, to view pornography, and not go to church.

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It's not a problem to have expectations for other people, and it's not even a problem that expectations differ from person to person. Manuals become problematic when we tie our emotional wellbeing to how well other people follow our manuals. We create unnecessary pain and suffering for ourselves when we do that, and doing that is a form of emotional childhood.

So to avoid doing that, you need to remember two things. Number one, other people don't have to follow your manuals. Other people have agency and get to choose how they want to behave. Number two, all manuals and their corresponding rules are optional. The rules are not laws of the universe, despite how many other people might agree with them, and you can always drop or change them, if you choose.

I didn't learn this concept of manuals until a few years ago, so for most of my life, I had no notion of the manuals I carried for other people. I also didn't recognize that my expectations were optional. The rules I had for how others should or shouldn't treat me felt very rigid, very inflexible, and very non-negotiable.

One such rule I used to have for my husband was about the kinds of gifts he should get me, and when he followed this rule, I was happy, but when he didn't, I'd get upset. One time, early in our marriage, he bought me a Disney Sorry! board game for my birthday. You know it's the game Sorry! but it was Disney themed. Now, I like board games, and I like Disney, but when I unwrapped this gift, I was first confused, then disappointed, and then irritated. I couldn't figure out why he thought I would want that for my birthday. The gift I had bought him for his birthday a couple of months prior had cost easily 10 times what the board game cost. The board game didn't

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seem romantic or thoughtful at all, and I had never mentioned anything about wanting a board game to him.

When I asked him why he had picked that, he told me he thought it would be a fun thing for me to play with the kids. Well, that sent me over the edge. I heard that and got even more upset, because that's NOT how you're supposed to pick gifts for your wife! This was *my* birthday, not one of the kids' birthdays! The gift should be something *I* want, something picked especially for *me*, not something picked for me *and* the kids! He had violated a big rule in my manual, and I was not happy about it. When he later gave me a vacuum for Mother's Day, I really flipped out and then told him he had to get any and all subsequent gifts pre-approved.

The funny thing was, before the board game and vacuum incidents, we had never had a conversation about the kinds of gifts I wanted him to give or not give me, how much they should cost, or any of that. I just expected him to know what I wanted. And manuals are often like that. We have them, but we don't share them with the people we create them for. We assume other people are either already aware of them or they will magically intuit all of our rules. Which, when I say that out loud, sounds pretty ridiculous. We expect other people to be mind readers or to see the world and think the same way we do, and that is just not realistic.

Now, I want to pause here and talk briefly about my reaction to those two gifts and my subsequent solution of telling my husband he had to run any gifts by me before buying them. Do I think my reactions were somewhat childish and ungrateful? Yes. Do I think a fair number of women would have reacted the same way or at least similarly? Also yes. Are there women who would have handled things differently? Absolutely yes! Maybe you're one of

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them, and that's totally fine. You might think the gift-giver should always be the one choosing the gift and gifts should be a surprise. You might think it's the thought that counts, so the gift receiver should be grateful no matter what.

I shared my gift philosophy with someone at church recently and got a look of disbelief and shock back. I know it seems cold and ungrateful to some people, and if that's you, I'd like you to consider something. Being grateful does not mean you have to shut off your desires and accept whatever you're given. Making your desires and wishes known is not *ungrateful*. It's not one thing at the expense of the other.

Women sometimes feel they shouldn't say what they really want, but honestly, why not? How are people supposed to know what you want if you don't tell them? Or maybe you think you *shouldn't* want things, that you should just accept and be grateful for what you have. If that were true, you would never grow. You are divinely appointed to want more. It's part of your spiritual DNA, and it helps you evolve and progress.

What if you're supposed to be grateful for what you have *and* want more? Consider the parable of the talents in the *New Testament*. Only the servant who accepted what he was given and didn't go after more was chastised by the master. Desire does not make you ungrateful; unbridled desire does. Unbridled desire is the kind that's demanding and arrogant and entitled, but desire in and of itself is God-given.

But, if you think my actions and my solution were wrong and you want to do things differently, that is totally fine! Whatever *your* situation is in *your* relationship, you get to figure out what works for *you*. It doesn't need to

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match what works for anyone else. There is no relationship template or model that all relationships need to follow or mirror or adhere to.

OK. Rant over. Back to our regularly scheduled programming about manuals.

One thing I suggest you do, especially for relationships you really care about or for relationships you're struggling with, is write out your manuals. Get the rules you have for people out of your head and onto paper so you can take a look at them and get clear about what you're thinking. It doesn't need to be an exhaustive list, but don't censor yourself here. If you have some rules that seem petty and childish, get them on paper too so you can look at everything together.

So, what are *all* the expectations you have for the other person? It might be helpful to put their name at the top of a page and then fill in these sentence frames.

- This person should always (blank).
- This person should sometimes (blank).
- This person should not (blank).
- This person should never (blank).
- When (blank) happens, this person should or shouldn't (blank).

Now you might have others, but those will get you started.

Once you get your rules on paper, you can do different things to examine and interrogate them. For example, you can rank them in order of importance. Are there any deal-breakers, meaning if someone violates a particular rule, it's



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grounds for ending the relationship? You can decide if you like all the rules. Do they make sense to you? They don't have to make sense to anyone else, but do they make sense and feel good to you? You can consider if they're in alignment with your values. Are they serving you and helping you create the kind of relationship you want? You can put the shoe on the other foot and consider if you'd want them applied to you. You can consider if any are outdated. Are there rules that might have been useful and appropriate at one time but aren't now?

From a personal empowerment standpoint, it's really helpful to look under the hood like this and see what's operating in the back of your mind regarding your relationships. I like the "looking under the hood" analogy because it reminds me that just like it's helpful to do that with cars and do periodic maintenance and tune-ups to keep a car running smoothly, it's also helpful to do periodic maintenance and tune-ups on our thinking to keep our relationships running smoothly.

Once you know what your manuals are, you might wonder if you should share them with others. If someone isn't following your manual and you think it's a problem, for example, should you tell them? Should you enlighten them about the rules you want them to follow?

Well, maybe.

You certainly *can*. You are an adult with agency after all, so you're allowed to make requests of other people. I did just that with my husband when I told him I wanted to pre-approve the gifts he gave me. The thing is, just don't tie your happiness to whether or not the other person follows your manual. If

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you need them to respond a certain way for you to be happy, you will severely limit your potential to be happy.

If you think you want to share your manual with someone else, I'd suggest you first consider two things. Number one, what do you hope to accomplish by sharing your manual with them? What's your motive behind sharing it? Remember, the other person may not see things the same way you do, and that's their prerogative. Are you wanting to have a conversation about your manual and willing to consider the other person's perspective, or are you trying to force them to see things your way?

Number two is, what will you do if the other person doesn't follow your manual? Decide ahead of time, with your prefrontal cortex, how you will respond to a potential conflict or refusal. Don't wait until the heat of the moment when emotions are high and tempers are flaring to decide what to do. Decide ahead of time what kind of response would feel like you at your best, what kind of response would keep you aligned with the person you want to be. What feels believable and empowering and loving to you to think? It could be something as simple as, "They're entitled to their opinion, just like me." Or, "They think this, and I think this. We could both be right." Or, "They're a human having a human experience, just like me." Or, "It's OK they think the way they do. I still love them and I still love me."

I hope learning about manuals has been eye-opening and helpful for you. It definitely has been for me. It has changed so much for me about how I think about relationships, and it's something I'm still practicing. I still have lots of room for improvement, for sure.

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Lastly, before I wrap up, I want to remind you of the Maya Angelou / Hal Runkel approach I shared in last week's episode. When you know better, do better (that's the Maya Angelou part) and you can do better by doing a little more of something desirable and a little less of something less desirable (that's the Hal Runkel part). Focus on progress over perfection.

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Have an amazing week everybody. I'll talk to you soon.