

# Sharing the load

Relationship therapist James Earl on why fun and growth are essential when it comes to an equal partnership.



**‘You never arrange things – it’s always me!’ We want our relationships to be equal, and to share the emotional load. So how do we do this?**

To answer this question, it’s helpful to understand what a long-term relationship is trying to achieve. Although we tend to talk about love and sex as being fundamental, I prefer to think about fun together and individual growth as the key dynamics. The advantage to this model is that fun and growth are happening in, or out, of a couple – so you can ask yourself, ‘How does my relationship match up to being single?’



Let’s start with fun. If you were single, you would be having fun. Your relationship should compare favourably to this.

Fun is a verb and is active – you make fun. Couples work best when you take turns to arrange dinner out, or suggest going for a walk, playing a board game, going dancing, visit a gallery, street market or bookshop, or initiate sex.

If only one partner does all these things, the amount of play together may be the same, but clearly the other partner is not sharing the load. In fact, if making fun for the couple is a basic requirement in a long-term relationship, then clearly this partner is not doing their job.

## Available for play

Even if we don’t really have time to play, the job is still there: you should convey in your behaviour that you’re available for play. A gentle, positive and playful manner goes a long way.

Think about it: the experience of going to the theatre is OK if you have booked the tickets and your partner has agreed to go. If, on the other hand, your partner books the tickets, it feels like a treat. The point is, we should try to treat each other. Share the load.

Initiating sex is similar. You may well end up having sex if you initiate and your partner says OK: but at least half the time it might be nice if your partner showed you they were keen, by initiating for themselves.

The other dynamic is supporting the individual growth of your partner. Living by yourself, you would be growing into the person you want to be. So, does your relationship hold you back or encourage your growth?

Supporting the other person’s freedom to be themselves is more passive than making fun, but equally important. Think about applauding on the sidelines. If you suggest taking a motorbike across

## Two questions for everyone in a long-term relationship

Am I having at least as much fun as I would if I were single?

Does my partner look for opportunities for fun with me? Who arranges things?

Do I feel like I can grow into myself better in the relationship than alone?  
Does my partner support my growth? Do they enjoy my success and progress?

If we both do both these jobs, we are sharing the emotional load.

(Note to self: share with partner!)

Vietnam for three weeks by yourself, your partner’s ideal reaction should be, ‘Wow! Go for it!’ (‘Should’ in this context just means ‘will almost always go better’.)

And don’t take over: if your partner says they are going to start painting, don’t try to share it with them, unless they invite you to do so. We also need space from each other.

## Strengthen the connection

All this explains why controlling behaviour is so negative: it’s not only no fun, but is a direct attack on our sense of growth. Similarly, disinterest or disconnectedness usually makes our feeling of individual growth feel unsupported, and is certainly very little fun.


If we want to map the conventional model of love and sex onto this fun and growth model,

you can think of the whole relationship being about love. Having fun with somebody and supporting their individual growth is the fundamental way we show our love for them.

Sex, on the other hand, is a just subset of fun. But really good sex can be also about growth: we feel like we are exploring, learning, sharing, connecting and developing.

Fun and growth are a more powerful criteria than love and sex: for example, people may tolerate low levels of physical intimacy if they still feel connected, are having fun in other ways, and feel like their partner is their primary cheerleader.

Few people leave a relationship because of love or sex, but without fun and growth we can feel there is very little point.

If we want an equal relationship, where both partners share the emotional load and engage with the job of doing the relationship, we should think of fun and growth as our guiding lights. 

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