

What Makes a Relationship Work

By Sheila Lowe, MS, CG

Please note, the subject of relationships is such a wide-ranging one that this article can hope to address only a tiny segment. The use of the pronoun "he" is intended to refer to both genders unless otherwise noted.

Connecting with other people and forming relationships is an integral part of being human. Among our most basic motivations is the need to connect, to be accepted and approved of, to be loved within the family of origin. If things go well directly after birth, the infant bonds with its parents and siblings, learning to mirror the love they have for him, learning to love himself and others. Later, when he enrolls in school, he broadens his connections, forming relationships with teachers and fellow students. As he continues to grow, his interests branch out to romantic connections. He will probably eventually marry or at least form long-term relationships. At work, too, more relationships are formed, now with bosses and co-workers. At some point, he may be motivated to move out into the community and build relationships in civic or business organizations that allow him to make a contribution to the world.

A healthy relationship where the benefits outweigh the negatives can contribute tremendously to each partner's satisfaction. But what if the child's need for love was not appropriately met early in life? It might be that the infant or its mother had to stay in hospital for some days or weeks after the birth. Or perhaps the mother had to go out to work right away and leave the child with a caretaker. Maybe the mother was loving, but had several other children to dilute her time and attention from the new baby. Or, at the other end of the spectrum is the actively abusive family where the child grows up believing it is not worthy of being loved. In all of these cases, on a profound level, the child feels the emptiness and it continues into adulthood.

One who grows up with an unfulfilled need for love is likely to expend a great deal of energy searching for ways to fill up the empty space inside his heart. Without knowing he is doing so, he attracts partners who reflect the traits of the physically or emotionally absent/abusive/ parent, unconsciously trying to get from that partner what he was missing from the parent. Unfortunately, these types of substitutions don't work at all well. Entering a relationship that is in some way reminiscent of an emotionally unhealthy mum or dad is only going to lead to results similar to what one experienced in childhood.

For example, a child who grew up in a home where there was continual criticism and little or no praise is likely to find himself mated to someone who is likewise emotionally cold, withholding love and affection, nitpicking every little fault, real or imagined. Even though that person doesn't at first present with those qualities, they are there, lurking beneath the surface, waiting to emerge once the relationship has matured to a certain point.

A partner who suffers similar deficits as one's parents is always going to be unable to provide the loving and nurturing that was missing. For such a person, even a relationship fraught with pain and difficulty may be viewed as better than being alone. As a result, he stays far too long with a partner who is unable to fulfill the unmet needs, whether the need is for love, admiration and appreciation, to feel safe, to be free, or to be approved of. Why? Because it feels familiar,

and change is among the most difficult challenges humans face. In fact, we might say that people only change when it hurts too much to stay the same. But remember the adage, *If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got.*

So, is it even possible to build a healthy relationship, not having had a good example to learn from? Certainly, there is no absolute recipe, no "if I do 'this' or 'that' everything will be perfect" formula. But there are several key ingredients to a healthy relationship, and if most of these ingredients are adhered to, chances are much higher that it will survive and thrive.

Keys to Lasting Love

We'll start with the premise that certain traits, when practiced regularly, will significantly improve *all* types of relationships. These include the following:

- Compassion
- Acceptance
- Appreciation
- Tolerance
- Sincere expressions of warmth, affection, and forgiveness.

All these are important, but there's one missing from this list. Perhaps the *most* important key of all is *good communication*. Communication means more than just talking. It means being in the moment and really listening to what the other person is saying; not racing ahead in your mind, thinking about how you are going to respond. It includes having a sense of humor, not taking yourself too seriously, being able to laugh at yourself and look at the lighter side, even when things are not going well. It also means being willing to engage in reasonable attempts at conflict resolution, and being diplomatic but honest, especially when offering criticism.

Handwriting provides information about how the writer communicates. While the trait-stroke, atomistic method of analysis gives specific strokes to look for, the gestalt graphologist's mantra is, "*no single element of handwriting means anything outside the context of a particular handwriting sample.*" What follows are some broad generalizations in the gestalt style.

Clear communication: look for an open picture of space and middle zone forms with clear ovals. The more interference in o's and a's, the less clear communication there will be. Where letters that end above the baseline (*trait suspendu*), have a high degree of illegibility, missing letters, or letters that look like something other than what they are supposed to be, it is likely that the writer is leaving out important information.

Physical drives: Another important key is for each partner to have similar (not identical) drives. If one partner is an action junkie with a long, wide lower zone and heavy pressure, while the other is a couch potato whose writing just sits on the page with middle zone emphasis, problems are likely to arise when one wants to dash around getting involved in a wide array of activities and the other prefers to stay home. To determine drive, look at the rhythm, pressure, and speed.

Intelligence: The next key is a comparable level of intelligence. This is necessary to deter partners from creating a parent/child relationship where the cleverer one feels superior and the lesser endowed partner feels inferior. A writer who uses simplified forms with signs of expres-

siveness and well-organized writing will probably have quite different interests than one who chooses a strongly copybook style or great elaboration.

Spiritual values: This is yet another important key to lasting love. In this sense, ‘spiritual’ does not mean religious. Spirituality is independent of religion. Strictly religious people may find the openness of a purely spiritual person daunting, while spiritual people who are not religious may feel that organized religion is too restrictive. Two opposing views in this area can doom a relationship. Because a spiritually-oriented person has a greater focus on freedom and independence, his handwriting is likely to have an open, airy spatial arrangement, simplification, and looser rhythm than the strictly religious person who is more comfortable following rules. The religious person may use more of a copybook style with taller upper zone forms, more narrowness and a more compact spatial arrangement.

Sense of responsibility: Feeling a sense of responsibility toward one another helps each partner sustain their commitment through difficult times. This is may be more difficult to define in handwriting, but one might look for moderate regularity, carefully placed i dots and t-crosses, a moderate degree of connectedness, especially at the ends of words.

Healthy self-image

In a healthy relationship, both partners will have a good self-image, which is made up of many traits, including these:

- **Love for self**—you must love yourself before you can truly love someone else.
- **Genuineness of character**—faking it doesn’t work.
- **Empathy**—being able to put yourself in the other person’s shoes.
- **Healthy self-disclosure**—if you expect your partner to be honest and open with you, you must be prepared to offer the same.
- **Enjoyment**—knowing how to have fun and enjoy life.
- **Unconditional positive regard**—loving your partner without putting conditions on it.
- **Intimacy**—more than just sex, intimacy means confidential, close communication. Each partner must be able to trust the other, to open up and be vulnerable, knowing that his or her trust will not be betrayed.
- **Encouragement**—when one partner is down, the other is there to pick him or her up.
- **Fairness**—no double standards. What’s good for one is good for the other.
- **Dependability**—if you say you’re going to do something, do it. Let your partner know they can count on you.
- **Mutual interests**—you must have some things in common. Otherwise, you’re just two people who get together once in a while for sex or dinner, or...
- **Openness to experience**—being willing to try something new and different keeps the relationship fresh.
- **Commitment**—this is part of dependability and trust. When each knows there’s a deep commitment, they can breathe easier, being able to rely on their partner being there.

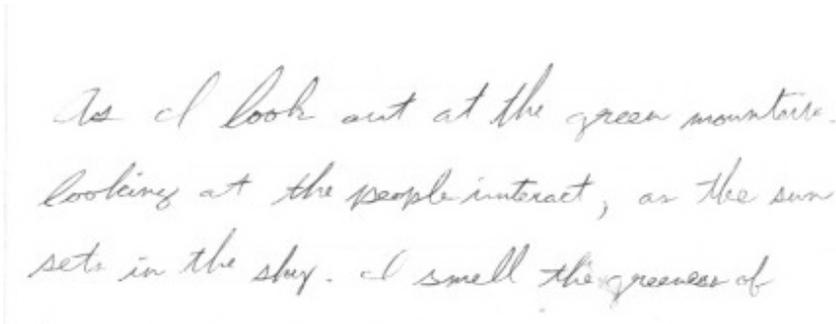
Of course, even with all this, no relationship is going to be perfect. There will be times when there are disagreements. But if most of these elements have been developed, the couple will be equipped to work through problems together when they arise—and arise they will.

There are far too many possibilities to describe what the handwriting would look like of someone who possessed all these traits. Instead, let us consider a few of the characteristics that will *not* appear in the handwriting of someone with a good self-image.

Extremes

Extremes of any kind can be considered negative. Extremes in **letter forms** are designed to cover up what is really going on behind the mask that extremes create.

Extremes in **pressure**, too light or too heavy, are a sign of frustration and anger. In the case of too-heavy pressure, the anger bursts out onto other people, while those who write with too-light pressure turn the anger inward (eventually, it will probably burst out, too). Extremes in **slant** are



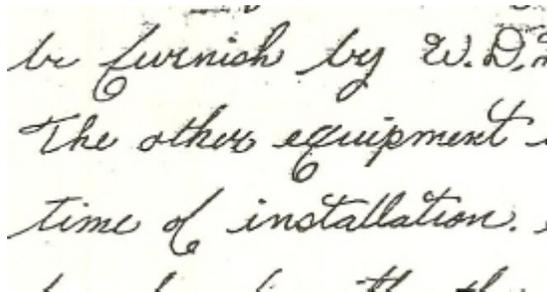
Although difficult to detect in a copy, this handwriting has extremely light pressure. Easier to see is the extremely tall upper zone and right slant

problematic because they accompany a lack of emotional control.

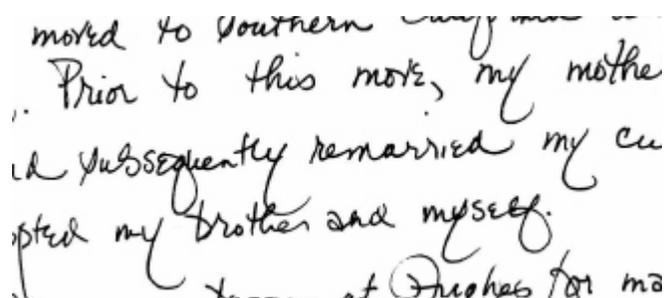
Extremes in **zonal height and/or width** come with a wide variety of issues. If the middle zone is too large, there will be problems of egocentricity, perhaps narcissism. If too small, there may be depression, a need to disappear off the page. If one or two zones is overemphasized at the expense of another, the writer is avoiding what the de-emphasized zone represents. For example, if the upper and lower zone are extremely long, while the middle zone is tiny, the writer is flinging his energy outward into all sorts of mental and physical activities to avoid looking at what's going on in his daily life.

A **malformed lower zone** virtually always points to someone with unresolved sexual issues, usually a background of sexual abuse.

Twists and knots and triangles of various kinds in the lower zone do not bode well for long-term intimacy.



Coiled strokes suggest a self-oriented person who is less interested in the needs of others.



These counterstrokes indicate that the physical drives are being expressed in an unusual manner.

It would be better for the writer to seek therapy before entering a relationship.

agencies.
 Now I'm writing to be
 a handwriting expert/ward

Extremely long lower zones, especially when left open, suggest restlessness in one who may not be satisfied by just one partner.

where the stroke goes all the way around the circle before moving forward, the writer came from a family where there was no open, honest discussion. In most cases, at least one of the parents is likely to have had an alcohol dependency.

Handwriting examples showing double and triple looped ovals, such as in this handwriting are problematic for being able to express negative emotions.

Double or triple looped ovals, such as in this handwriting are problematic for being able to express negative emotions.

my goals
 in a position in
 not knowledge and
 learn. Long term
 upper management
 learn. That's how

The elliptical form of the "g" is found in manipulators who know how to get their way.

they want, one way or another.

Other handwriting characteristics to avoid when considering a relationship include heavy crossing out of words, which indicates that the person cannot bear to be wrong, and heavy punctuation ("dot grinding"), which is a sign of deep hostility and may manifest in physically abusive behavior.

Communication was mentioned earlier. Although clear communication is seen in a well balanced picture of space, the vowel letters, especially o and a should be clear of hooks, extra loops, or other interferences. Double looped ovals are an indication of someone who has trouble verbalizing their emotions. They may talk a lot, but not really say much of anything. With the double-joined oval,

Handwriting example showing double-joined ovals, such as in the words "you are one" and "ts in the couni".

Double joined ovals are often made by adult children of alcoholics who have trouble communicating openly.

Here's an interesting one—disconnecting the letter "g" at the end of a word may signify someone who has trouble maintaining a **commitment**. The reason for it specifically being the "g" is that some analysts consider this letter to contain the "family circle" in the middle zone part. The shape of that circle tells a lot about the writer's family relationships. For example, someone who makes the figure 8 "g" leaves the circle open and is likely to have incomplete family relationships. Men who disconnect the final "g" in a word often have trouble making a full emotional commitment.

Another letter "g" that can point to problems is when the circle is made in an elliptical (elongated) form, with the lower zone left open toward the left. This form tends to be used by those who are excellent manipulators. Note: this is not to suggest they are "bad" people; they simply know how to get what

I AM WE'RE NOT GOD BLESSINGS
NOW SEE, AS I LEAVE
MY THOUGHTS

Heavy punctuation and cross outs are signs of hostility that may spill into abusive behavior.

The bottom line, though, is that much of a successful relationship is in the indefinable chemistry and goodwill. Two people might appear to be completely compatible, but if they don't have the chemistry and goodwill to make a relationship work, it won't work. On the other hand, there may be areas of incompatibility, but with chemistry and good will, a relationship can succeed. Being able to identify in handwriting what motivates relationship partners can be a great help in developing a healthy re-

lationship, but it's only one piece of the puzzle.

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