

Florida Poly Retreat 2008

How to Screw Up a Poly Relationship (and make everyone miserable while you're at it)

If you are interested in building strong, healthy polyamorous relationships which allow everyone involved to grow and to seek happiness, there are many resources out there that can help you. You'll find books, Web sites (including mine!), and all sorts of guidelines that can give you tools to make your relationships better.

This is not one of those resources.

This is a guideline for developing the tools and techniques to reduce your relationships to smoking craters, and to maximize the chances of catastrophic failure and personal unhappiness. Along the way, we'll talk about techniques to create rigid and confining relationship rules, use boundaries as blunt instruments, and make hostile environments guaranteed to make your partners unhappy.

If that doesn't sound like your thing, you might want to read this anyway so as to get a sense of what *not* to do.

Part I: Basic Ways to Go Off the Rails

Some of the tools you'll need as you start your journey into misery and mayhem are so simple that you may possess them already and not even know it. In fact, these simple, intuitive techniques can be among the most powerful weapons in your arsenal for screwing things up.

1. The Art of Storytelling

The first of these tools has its roots in simple storytelling. Human beings are a storytelling species, and the way we tell stories helps shape and define the way we see the world. It's such a fundamental part of who we are that we tell stories without even being aware of it.

A famous series of psychological experiments involves people with split brains--people for whom the corpus callosum, the part of the brain that connects the left and right hemisphere, has been damaged or intentionally severed (which used to be done to control severe epilepsy). Folks with a non-working corpus callosum in some ways behave almost like two people in the same body; the left part of the brain controls the right side of the body and receives information from the right part of the visual field, and vice versa.

All kinds of experiments have been done with folks like this, one of the most famous of which in-

volves projecting two different images onto a person's left and right fields of vision, so the two sides of the brain see two different pictures. The person is then asked to reach into two bags, one with each hand, and pull out a plastic toy that has something to do with the image they saw.

In one experiment, a person's left hemisphere was shown a picture of a chicken coop, and a person's right hemisphere was shown a picture of a snowbank. The person was then asked to reach into the bags and pull out figurines that somehow relate to the picture. Subjects would feel around for a while, then pull out a little plastic chicken with their right hand and a little snow shover with their left.

Now, the speech centers are usually in the left side of the brain, so when you talk to one of these folks, you're talking to the left hemisphere. The Researcher would ask "Why did you pull out the chicken?" and the subjects would say "Well, I saw a chicken coop." Pretty simple, really.

But then the researcher would ask "Why did you pull out the shovel?" Now, keep in mind that the left and right hemispheres *can not communicate at all*. The left hemisphere has *no freaking clue* why the right hemisphere chose the shovel. But the left hemisphere would answer the question anyway-- "Oh, well, when you have chickens, you have to shovel all the chicken droppings out of the chicken coop."

This explanation is total make-believe. The left hemisphere has no idea what the right hemisphere saw and no idea what the right hemisphere is doing. But nevertheless, completely subconsciously and without realizing it, the person *made up a story* to explain his behavior, then accepted his own story without question.

You can learn to turn this kind of storytelling to your advantage if you want to wreck your relationships and piss off the folks around you.

It's easy. When you see someone doing something, especially if it's something that irks you, you can easily invent stories to explain their behavior. If you're feeling sufficiently irked, it becomes effortless to invent stories that explain their behavior and also make them out to be bad guys. They're leaving their dirty socks on the floor *just to piss you off*, not because the clothes hamper is full. The trash hasn't been taken out yet because they're deliberately trying to provoke you, not because it's raining outside.

TIP

Remember, you tell yourself stories all the time, automatically and without conscious awareness of it. One thing that increases the effectiveness of making up stories about other people's motivations is to try not to ask them about it. Don't try to verify the stories you tell yourself; instead, act as though they are true, without stopping to see if the person who's irking you has some other reason for his or her behavior!

If you find yourself angry or annoyed by someone's behavior, and you stop to ask them why they're behaving the way they are, you might find out that your story isn't correct, and there's some other motivation for the behavior--something that's really not annoying at all. This might lead to harmony and conflict resolution. So don't do it.

If you practice this technique diligently, you may one day master it to such an extent that you can imagine entire conspiracies to explain other people's behaviors. A friend of mine likes to argue online with the conspiracy theorists who believe that NASA faked the moon landing. He has become

so good at deflating the loopier claims of the moon hoax conspiracy theorists that some of the conspiracy nutters now claim that he must be in the employ of secret forces in the government, who pay him one dollar per Internet post to rebut their claims and promote the conspiracy. Now that's some world-class storytelling.

2. Let Your Feelings Be Your Guide

You will probably encounter many situations throughout your life which evoke an emotional response from within you. With only a little practice, you can learn to let these emotions guide you down the path of ruin.

This is as easy as falling off a log, and nearly three times as much fun. When someone or something evokes an emotional response in you, whatever it may be, you will tend to feel that your emotion is justified. Why? Because the ancient, pre-linguistic parts of your brain from which your emotions come are the same parts of your brain that tell you whether or not your emotions are justified. It's a clever and tidy system.

When you feel angry, your emotions will tell you that it's because someone has *made* you angry. When you feel jealous, threatened, or insecure, your first impulse will be to believe that it's because someone has *made* you feel these things. And if you feel bad because someone else has made you feel bad, then retaliating against that person, or trying to prevent that person from doing whatever it is that made you feel those things, is perfectly appropriate, right?

Now, in truth, your emotions don't always tell you the truth. Sometimes, the things you feel say more about you than they do about the people around you, and sometimes, the things you feel aren't even grounded in reality at all. If you feel insecure, you may believe that your partner wants to leave you, or your partner doesn't value you, even when your partner loves you very much and would do anything to be with you. But when your feelings tell you something, that becomes the whole of your emotional reality, unless you deliberately work to understand them and you start with the assumption that they may not necessarily always be telling the truth.

If you want to make a mess of things, I recommend avoiding this.

Instead, proceed as though all of your emotional responses are 100% correct and justified, and that furthermore you feel the way you do because your partner is causing you to feel these things. That way, it becomes easy to use your feelings as an excuse to retaliate against, control, or manipulate your partner.

TIP

One thing that can really help you with this is cultivating insecurity. If you are insecure, then it becomes much easier to distrust your partner's motives, and the urge to control your partner will become much stronger.

Let's say that you secretly believe you are not good enough, not pretty enough, not smart enough, or not sexy enough for your partner. You still have a problem; if you're generally unlovable, why would your partner be with you? You can answer this conundrum by inventing a story: Your partner is with you because he or she doesn't know any better. However, if he or she meets someone prettier or smarter or sexier than you, of course he or she will wake up, see the error, and abandon you for that other person!

So of course you can now easily use this to justify controlling the people your partner interacts with, or voicing an objection to your partner's new love interest (someone who, naturally, must be prettier, smarter, sexier, and more desirable than you are), or for setting excessively restrictive rules on your partner's behavior.

It can be difficult for you to understand why anyone would want to be with you if you cultivate a self-image that says you are not desirable, and it can then feel natural and reasonable to try to control your partner to prevent him or her from discovering just how unsexy and undesirable you are. Therefore, dwelling on all the reasons that you're not as sexy, smart, good, desirable, or otherwise worthwhile as the other folks around you can become a powerful tool in helping you to let your emotions run all over your relationship.

A pesky fact that you'll want to avoid is that just because you *feel* something is true does not necessarily mean that it *is* true. Just because you feel attacked does not necessarily mean someone is attacking you; just because you feel threatened does not necessarily mean you are being threatened; just because you feel unappreciated does not necessarily mean your partner does not appreciate you.

But it's easy to act as though your emotions are always correct, and by doing this, you can soon learn to drive people away and alienate those who otherwise care about you. In fact, a strong enough negative emotion can even make you feel that you, as the person who's been wronged, are perfectly justified in retaliating against whoever it is who's wronged you in all kinds of destructive ways. "You hurt my feelings, so I'm not going to pay you back the money I owe you" is a particularly effective one. "You hurt my feelings, so I'm going to slander you to all your friends" works well, too. If you behave in these ways and then complain that the other person is "causing drama," so much the better.

It's surprisingly difficult to avoid this trap, even if for some reason you want healthy, constructive relationships. Emotions are sneaky and powerful, and when you're hip-deep in negative emotions, it becomes difficult to pry yourself away from them and ask if the things you're feeling are grounded in reality.

Some folks will say things like "feel with your heart, but check your facts." If your goal is to turn your relationship life into a train wreck, I recommend ignoring this advice.

3. Stay inside your comfort zone

One of the things I hear often when people start talking about their relationships and expressing doubt about trying new things is "Don't do anything you're not comfortable with." I think this is wonderful advice--for folks who don't want their relationships to grow.

Now, there are comfort zones and there are *comfort zones*. Sometimes, you're uncomfortable with an idea because it simply doesn't jive in any way with what you want your life to look like, and it never will. That's fine.

However, change is invariably accompanied by a certain amount of discomfort, and learning new skills is also uncomfortable. The novel is always less comfortable than the familiar, all other things

being equal. Taken to its (il)logical conclusion, “don’t do anything you don’t feel comfortable with” means “don’t learn, don’t change, and don’t allow the relationship to progress in any new ways”--in short, the perfect recipe for a relationship made out of suck and fail.

This is particularly true of sex. For better or for worse, American society is still deeply rooted in Puritanical attitudes toward sex, and one of the most threatening and uncomfortable things many folks face concern situations where a partner wants to explore something new in the sexual part of a relationship. From a very early age, many people are strongly inculcated with a deep unease about sex, and this can create very powerful discomfort around anything new in sex, especially if the new thing is perceived as being “weird” or “not normal.”

So when your partner says “Honey, our sex life is becoming routine; I’d like to try the Reverse Monkey with Lotus Blossom and Chainsaw position tonight,” it’s a simple matter to allow your feelings of discomfort to become a way of slamming the door in your partner’s face. If you refuse every new thing your partner proposes, you’re already on the way to disappointing your partner and making your partner feel unsafe in talking to you about new things; if you refuse without even discussing why, because you’re not comfortable talking about it, you get bonus points.

Part II: Communication (and How to Sabotage It)

One thing you’ll hear over and over again, both in polyamorous and in traditional relationships, is that communication is the single most important part of building a happy, healthy relationship. This is absolutely true; often, the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy relationship simply comes down to the quality of the communication in it.

There are many ways to make your relationships run off the rails because of communication issues. The simplest ones--lie to your partner, withhold information from your partner, refuse to talk to your partner, that sort of thing--are pretty obvious, so I won’t go into them here. If you want to drive your relationship into the ground, all you really need to do is not talk openly to your partner, and you’ll get there.

Instead, I’ll talk about more subtle communication problems, which you can use to make it *look* like you’re communicating without *actually* communicating.

Many folks who talk about communication problems in a relationship will start out by saying “I know communication is important, but--”. Now, if you’re one of those folks who wants a happy, healthy relationship, the correct way to punctuate the phrase “I know communication is important” is with a period at the end. There isn’t any “but” that gets you around it. “But it’s hard” or “but it’s uncomfortable” or “but I feel awkward talking about certain things” are all ways of saying “I don’t communicate,” and if you’re not communicating, you’re already halfway to destroying your relationship.

I promised more subtle ways to screw up communication, though, so here we go.

1. Look for the Hidden Message

A great way to undermine communication in a relationship is to start from the assumption that

whenever your partner says something, there's a hidden meaning behind his or her words--something your partner *isn't* saying. With enough creativity, imagination, and stubbornness, you can invent all sorts of hidden meanings in your partner's words, no matter how clearly and directly your partner speaks.

Perhaps your partner says "I'd like to go out to dinner tonight." You might be able to turn this into a source of angst and discontent by assuming that what your partner *really* means is "I don't like your cooking."

Or perhaps your partner says "I really like when my partner does the Reverse Monkey With Lotus Blossom and Chainsaw position in bed." You can turn this into a perceived criticism of you by saying "Well, I don't like the Reverse Monkey with Lotus Blossom and Chainsaw, so clearly, what you're *really* saying is that you don't like being with me."

TIP

You can really make this technique work for you by combining it with telling yourself stories about your partner's motivations. These two tools support each other powerfully, and indeed you may find you can ruin your relationships without the aid of any of the other techniques I talk about here. So, for example, you can tell yourself "My partner said he wants to go out to dinner tonight. He's probably trying to tell me that he doesn't like my cooking. But when I cooked dinner for him last night, he told me he loved my cooking and he even went back for seconds. Why would he do that if he didn't like my cooking? It must have been because he was trying to mislead me so that I'd give him sex after dinner. That bastard! He's willing to lie to me for sex!"

2. Speak in Riddles

The flip side of looking for hidden meanings in your partner's word is to speak indirectly and plant hidden meanings in your own.

There might be many reasons for this; perhaps you're talking about a delicate, emotionally-charged subject and you don't want to endure the discomfort of talking about it directly. Or perhaps you want to ask your partner for something, but you're afraid of rejection, so you ask for it in a roundabout, indirect way so that if your partner says "no," you can always just deny that you were asking for it in the first place.

Regardless, by speaking indirectly, you can undermine communication in your relationship and create subtle, long-term problems that can become an endless wellspring for conflict and trouble.

Dropping hints about what you want without actually asking for the things you want is almost sure to create frustration and anger, because if you don't end up getting what you want, you won't really know why. Is your partner simply not picking up on your hints? Is your partner deliberately not giving them to you? Is your partner not paying attention to you? This technique offers endless opportunity for second-guessing and confusion.

Part III: Intermediate Techniques for Screwing Things Up

Here, I'll get into some of the more advanced ways you can make things go wrong in ways that perhaps aren't easy to see immediately. These are strategies that you can use to wrap your relationships around the axle in complicated ways that will have your friends scratching their heads and saying "Well, I admire the problem, but I sure don't see a solution!"

1. Compare yourself to others

Of course, we all know that comparing yourself to other people is a great way to end in madness. You can say things like "I'm not as skinny as her" or "I'm not as wealthy as her" or "I'm not as popular as him" and end up feeling bad about yourself in no time. And I'm not knocking that technique at all; it's a great way to undermine your self-confidence and with it, your relationships.

But an advanced practitioner at the art of screwing things up knows that there are variations on this theme which are more subtle, but also more effective. One of these is particularly well-suited to polyamory, and that is to draw inferences about what your partner wants by looking at your partner's other partners.

This is as simple as finding some point of difference between yourself and your partner's other sweetie, or even between yourself and your partner's exes, and telling yourself "This is what my partner actually wants."

Start simple. If you are short and your partner's other sweetie is tall, just tell yourself "My partner really prefers tall people." Use your imagination; get creative. You can *always* find something about someone else that's different from you! "I am introverted; my partner's other sweetie is an extrovert. That means my partner really likes extroverts." I don't know how to cook, and my partner's ex-boyfriend was a master chef. My partner really wants to be with someone who can cook."

Whatever it is, the trick is to find some point of difference, and then talk yourself into believing that your partner really wants whatever it is that makes you different, and use this as "evidence" that your partner doesn't really want to be with you.

TIP

The places where you and your partner's other sweeties are different are what makes your relationship unique, and ensures that you are not interchangeable and can never be replaced. The fact is, every human being is different from every other, and this is part of what gives every relationship its own special, irreplaceable dynamic. Healthy relationships, especially healthy polyamorous relationships, cherish and celebrate the differences between people.

You can use that to your advantage, if your goal is to screw things up, by taking one of the most precious things about human beings--the fact that in a world of six billion, each of us is utterly unique--and turning it into a weapon of mass relationship destruction.

2. Choose incompatible partners

This is an often-overlooked technique that's an oldie but a goodie. I include it in "intermediate techniques" because it is so often overlooked, and because basic common sense might suggest that you don't do this. When properly employed, this technique can ensure failure from the very start.

You get bonus points when employing this technique for choosing partners whose most basic desires from their relationships is as radically incompatible with yours as possible. You're a polyamorous suburbanite who doesn't want kids, collects sports cars, and meets with your coven every other weekend. So why not choose a conservative, monogamous Christian partner who lives on a farm, raises horses, and wants to raise half a dozen kids in quiet seclusion? No way that won't end in tears, right?

3. Settle for substandard relationships

Once you've chosen an incompatible partner, you can keep the misery alive for a long time simply by settling for a relationship that doesn't meet your needs (or the needs of your partner). This technique is especially powerful when combined with low self-esteem; persuade yourself that this relationship is the best you'll ever have and that if you lose it, nobody else could possibly want you.

Settling for a relationship that does not meet your needs is a slow, insidious way to corrode your own happiness and that of the people around you. You can set precedents early in a relationship simply by developing a habit of not voicing your needs. The more you find yourself making concessions for the sake of an inherently unsatisfying relationship, the harder it becomes to assert your needs later on down the road, and the more bitter and painful the resulting catastrophe becomes.

TIP

Adopting the attitude that a relationship works best when it serves the needs of all the people involved is a good way to help you build positive, healthy relationships right out the gate. So to further the interests of unhappiness and mayhem, you may not want to start this way. Instead, choose partners you know up front that you won't be compatible with, then say nothing whenever the incompatibilities appear.

A martyr complex can really help you build dysfunctional, unhappy relationships. Convince yourself that you're not asserting your needs because it's important to sacrifice yourself for the benefit of others. Find ways to persuade yourself that becoming unhappy in a relationship is a feature, not a bug. Just a little touch of martyrdom in the face of your own unhappiness can really suck the joy right out of life.

Part IV: Advanced Ways to Make Things Go Wrong

Now comes the part I know you've been waiting for--the sophisticated ways to make things go wrong. You've mastered relationship basics, you know how to make things work smoothly on a day-to-day basis, but what you really want is some unusual, unexpected ways to send things over the bend. Wait no more! Even if your relationship is solid and happy, you can still find ways to plant the seeds of epic fail.

1. Prioritize an abstract ideal over real relationships with real people

You know what you want your life to look like, and you set out to choose partners with whom you're compatible. You seek people whose ideas about relationship are in line with yours. What can go wrong?

Ah, I'm glad you asked! Now that you have some ideas about what you want, set them in stone. Create a rigid idea about the forms your relationships should take, and allow absolutely no flexibility in those ideas. Decide in advance how you and your partners will interact with each other, and then stick to this no matter what.

Sometimes, folks who are new to polyamory will stumble on to this technique intuitively. For example, married couples who want to explore non-monogamy will often decide that what they want is a bisexual woman who will agree to be involved sexually with both of them "equally," and who will fit herself into their fantasy triad, agreeing in advance not to be involved with anyone else and not to do anything which might threaten either member of the married couple. Of course, this third person can't be involved sexually or romantically with only one member of the married couple (that might make the other member feel jealous), or have any outside partners (that might be too threatening, and doesn't fit into the tidy fantasy). This is an approach to making things go wrong that almost all experienced poly folk have encountered a time or twelve.

But it's not just newcomers who do this. It's a technique available to anyone who wants to create a disaster. All you really need to do is decide in advance on some form you want your relationship to take, before you've even met anyone to have a relationship *with*, and then reject anyone who doesn't fit perfectly into your idealized relationship form (or who questions your idealized relationship form, or who asserts a desire to have a voice in how the relationship will be...)

People like to feel empowered in their relationships; they like to feel that they are desired for who they are rather than just because they happen to be the right sex and the right sexual orientation, and they generally don't like feeling that they are obligated to have sex with someone simply because it's the only way they can get close to someone else. So by insisting on a rigid, inflexible relationship form up front, you can alienate even those folks who might end up forming a perfect relationship with you if you just let the relationship develop naturally.

TIP

People are surprisingly bad at predicting in advance what will and will not make them happy, especially in situations they have no direct, personal experience with. So by sitting in a chair and deciding in advance how your relationship life will be, and then refusing to consider any alternative, you can cut yourself off from things that might make you happy, without even knowing it!

Conversely, you might get what you want, and then discover it doesn't make you happy. If this happens, I recommend blaming someone else for your unhappiness.

2. Use your relationship boundaries as blunt instruments

This is a delightfully subtle and devious way to undermine relationships. After all, good relationships often rely on an ability to assert your needs and boundaries, and relationship counsellors often encourage their clients to set boundaries in their relationships. So by taking this idea and running with it, you can sabotage your happiness while making it look like you're really trying to work things out!

There are some fairly obvious ways to do this. One of the best is to find something that makes you uncomfortable, then use your discomfort to enforce a boundary on your partner. "It makes me uncomfortable when you talk to any of your ex-partners. Or to anyone who's more physically attractive than I am. So I'm telling you to cut off all contact with your exes, or with anyone who makes me feel threatened or uncomfortable." Just like that, you can assert boundaries on your partner's behavior in a disruptive way.

But with a little creativity, there's so much more you can do.

Let's take an example of a reasonable, healthy boundary that most people would agree is a good idea: a boundary around STD risks. Now, different folks have different notions about what is and is not an acceptable level of risk around sexually transmitted diseases, and negotiation around these is a very typical part of sexual relationships.

Just a little bit of a difference in focus and emphasis during these conversations, though, can make all the difference.

When you're talking to another person, especially about something like STDs, it's remarkably easy to make folks feel bludgeoned and beaten while maintaining the appearance that you're just being reasonable. One way to do this is to start the conversation by stating precisely what you expect in a way that makes the other people around you feel like you're dictating, not negotiating. Disparaging any disagreement before it even happens wins you bonus points.

"I don't believe that condoms are sufficient protection against all STD risks" is reasonable for some people. "I will not get involved with people who just rely on condoms and don't care about the STD status of their partners" immediately puts anyone else on the defensive, even if they agree with you; it creates a subtle expectation that anyone who voices an objection is immediately disqualified from your pool of potential partners, so there's a pressure to conform before anyone else has even begun. "I think those irresponsible losers who rely on condoms to keep their partners safe are a menace; how do you feel?" will make people feel badgered before they even open their mouths.

TIP

When you discuss boundaries, it's not what you say, it's how you say it. A dialog implies that you're willing to listen to the other person involved. Starting a conversation with a question rather than statement is a simple way to initiate a dialog; "Where do you place your STD boundaries?" is probably going to be better received by many people than "These are where my boundaries are; what do you say to that?"

Now, when you engage in dialog, you will likely find that the other person starts from a position that's different from yours. In this kind of situation, if you respond with "But this is what I need," you will often make the other person feel imposed upon. Followup questions--"What about this potential issue?" is much less blunt and invites dialog. So if your goal is to make a mess, you might want to avoid doing this.

3. Build a relationship entirely around your partner

Now, this might seem at first glance to be a positive, healthy thing to do. If by some chance you've managed, despite your best effort, to find yourself in a positive, healthy relationship with someone who shares your relationship goals, and you've developed habits of good communication, you might find yourself wanting to spend time with your partner.

Fear not; you can turn this to your advantage. All is not lost! You can still make this relationship suck. And you can do it just by indulging your natural urge to spend time with your partner. *All the time*. For bonus points, make sure you don't have any hobbies or interests of your own, to ensure that if a situation comes up when you aren't with your partner, you have no idea what to do.

By developing a relationship predicated on spending every waking hour with your partner, you can plant the seeds for catastrophe if your relationship becomes actively polyamorous.

TIP

If you're in a polyamorous relationship, and you've practiced the technique of spending every waking moment with your partner to the exclusion of everyone else, you can help undermine any other relationships that may form before they even make it out of the starting gate.

Should it happen that your partner has the opportunity to explore a new relationship, you can easily create a sense of guilt in your partner simply by making sure that you are as miserable as possible when your partner spends time with the new person. This can help ruin the mood any time your partner spends time with the new person, which can in turn breed resentment and unhappiness inside your own relationship.

4. Take leaving the relationship off the table

This is the pinnacle of all these other techniques, the cherry on top of the ice cream cake of suck. If you practice all these other tips and techniques, you'll soon find that your relationships are unhappy and dissatisfying; by refusing even to consider the possibility of leaving the relationship, you create a psychological sense that *this is as good as it will ever be, and things will never be better*.

A common trait of people who are involved in happy, fulfilling relationships is the sense that they could be happy on their own, and manage to build lives for themselves without the relationship--but they choose not to, and choose to continue to be in the relationship, because it adds value to their lives. When folks stay in a relationship because that relationship makes their lives better, or because they feel that the relationship makes them better people, then they're unlikely ever to feel trapped or dissatisfied by the relationship. Even when the relationship has its normal ups and downs, they choose to work through rough spots because they believe that the relationship has positive value.

On the other hand, folks who remain in a relationship because they feel they have no choice and it's what they are expected to do can easily end up feeling trapped. If it goes on this way for too long, they may come to feel that they don't deserve anything better. This kind of environment is corrosive to personal happiness and fulfillment, so simply by removing the option of leaving, you can help ensure that your relationships will be less satisfying. Engaging in a relationship as though it were an unpleasant chore, rather than because it's something that you love and that makes you happy, is an excellent method of personal unhappiness.

Appendix: Letting Others Make Your Relationship Unhappy

Now, it might be that you don't actually want a dismal, unhappy relationship. You may be one of those people who wants a happy and healthy relationship, and who does everything in your power to make that happen. Hey, it takes all kinds.

Even if your goal is happiness in a relationship, and you work toward that end, you can still run off the rails by letting your partner screw things up for you. Here are a couple of ways to do that.

1. Internalize a sense of guilt over other people's behavior

From time to time, you might find yourself in a position where your partner has done something that you don't like, or something that makes you unhappy. This is normal, and is part of any relationship—after all, nobody's perfect.

When this happens, there are a few things you can do. You can talk to your partner about it, and explain why his or her actions don't really work for you.

Or, you can figure out some sort of way to emotionally take responsibility for your partner's behavior. If you can, work on ways to convince yourself that it was all your fault; but if you can't do that, at least try to internalize a generalized sense of guilt over it. When you allow another person's behavior to make you feel guilty, your sense of self will soon begin to erode, and after that comes tears.

2. Allow your partner to isolate you from friends, family, and support

There's already a great deal of social support for the notion that a married couple should abandon all their old friends when they get married. By extending this notion, you can easily create a situation which allows problems to fester and grow.

You may not want to do this or see any value in it, yet find yourself participating in it anyway. It starts subtly; your partner begins paying more and more attention to you, to the exclusion of other friends, or family members, or whoever. After that can come subtle, almost subconscious pressure for you to do the same. As time goes on, you and your partner become increasingly isolated and cut off from other sources of support.

This is a situation that breeds problems in a relationship in a number of ways. It cuts off avenues of support and creates a psychological environment where you may not have any frame of reference to see how bad the problems have become. The more isolated you become, the harder it becomes to see your relationship objectively, and the easier it becomes to convince yourself that you have no alternatives save to remain in the relationship in spite of the fact that it doesn't meet your needs. With enough time, even a person who is well-intentioned and has positive relationship skills may find himself or herself sucked into a pit of despair.