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RELATIONSHIP RULE NO. 10

Take responsibility for your own happiness. *By doing this you will find more peace and joy in your life.*

Back when we were single, we decided what would be fun and what would make us happy. Our happiness was our responsibility.

Once in a relationship, we have someone to share that responsibility with—our partner. We unconsciously decide not to be as responsible for creating our own happiness, and we go on a mini-vacation. Yet, this absolute truth remains: we are responsible for all our thoughts, choices and actions, including feeling happy and sad.

It's been said, "Do not look to one person for your happiness." Yet, somewhere in the whirlwind of a new romance, we get swept away and fall in love. Instead of doing things just to please ourself, it also becomes

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our pleasure to do things to make our partner happy. When they light up with a smile, we light up even brighter.

Every loving man's goal is to have a happy woman as his partner. He takes credit for her happiness because, by his calculations, if she's happy, he *must* be doing something right.

A woman is happy when her partner can support her emotionally by making an effort to listen and empathize with her feelings. When he does this, she is happy. When he is not able to because he's otherwise occupied, her lack of happiness should not be his responsibility.

Sarah thinks the world of Bill. Since the beginning of their relationship, Bill has been the perfect partner. He calls when he is going to be late. He remembers holidays and special occasions. In the two years they have been together, Bill has done his best to show his love for Sarah.

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One day, Bill forgets that he made plans to have lunch with Sarah. He missed writing it down in his day-planner. Sarah arrives at the restaurant looking forward to her lunch date with Bill. After waiting a half-hour, she leaves, upset and confused as to why Bill didn't show.

In Sarah's mind, Bill is great and does all kinds of wonderful things to make her happy. It is out of character for Bill not to show up at the restaurant. Now feeling unimportant, Sarah is not happy. She was content until Bill didn't show. By her calculations, it must be Bill's fault that she is now upset. She blames him for disturbing her peace.

In this situation, it is as if Sarah has made an unspoken, unconscious agreement with Bill to relinquish to him a large percentage of her "responsibility to be happy." Sarah holds Bill responsible for her happiness—a responsibility that Sarah previously held for herself. We do not realize we have made this agree-

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ment until our partner shows up late or forgets an important date. Whatever the reason for the indiscretion, we feel hurt by their actions and we become unhappy. Therefore, we decide, it must be our partner's fault.

Blame is the poison that contaminates relationships and causes couples to retreat from each other. A man will inevitably shut down in the relationship if he feels a woman blames him for her unhappiness. Relationships don't have to take this road. It was unfortunate Bill forgot his lunch date with Sarah, but her happiness is her choice. She can choose her mood independently of Bill's behavior.

To have a healthy relationship, be clear about this: No one is responsible for making you happy *except you*. Responsibility for your own happiness is also up to you. Any deviation from this truth can result in suffering.

Blaming your partner for your unhappiness won't make the situation better; it will only put distance

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between you. From the other side, being repeatedly blamed for your partner's unhappiness will take its toll on your relationship. Taking responsibility for your own happiness will empower you and make your relationship stronger.

In another example, Henry and Jeanette decide to go out for dinner to relax and unwind after a long day at work. As he pays for the meal, Jeanette asks Henry how much money he spent during the week. Finances are a hot topic, and after three questions, Henry starts feeling like Jeanette is treating him like child, as if she doesn't trust him.

After arriving home, Jeanette heads toward the bedroom, slamming the door. She is obviously upset. Henry decides there's nothing he can do to make the situation better. He retreats to the family room, grabbing a beer and chips on the way. He turns on the TV, clicks through the channels, and instantly becomes one with an infomercial about vacation timeshares. It

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is the perfect distraction, and just what he needs to chill out and gain some objectivity about what had just happened.

After 15 minutes, Jeanette quietly comes out of the bedroom. She thought about what happened and realized how unkind she was. Jeanette wants to talk to Henry and make-up. She sees Henry watching TV, munching away on chips and drinking a beer. She leaves the room before Henry even knows she is there. She becomes even more upset. In her mind she's thinking, *How can he sit there relaxing when we just had a fight? I am anguishing over every word that was said and he doesn't care because he surely wouldn't be watching TV.*

Without fully understanding how men operate, Jeanette's reaction leads to more separation. She distances herself from Henry because she assumes that he doesn't care. She doesn't realize his behavior is not a true reflection of how much he cares. What Jeanette

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also doesn't realize is because of the way men are wired, they have the ability to disassociate from their feelings. Henry is taking responsibility for his feelings by giving himself a break. In this way, he is taking responsibility for his own happiness.

When we are happy with ourselves—when we are not waiting for someone else to do something to make us happy—we stop blaming. Then, when our partner does something that makes us happy, we can see it as a gift, not an expectation. We can see these gifts as a *dessert* and not as the *crumbs* we've been waiting for. It's a matter of choice and perception. When we do this, we consciously create an environment in which we truly feel happy.

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FOR WOMEN:

Make your own happiness a priority. Don't wait for your partner to do or say things to make you happy. Create routines and habits that you enjoy. Make a list of things you like to do. Does taking a dance lesson give you pleasure? Maybe spending one-on-one time with your children, having lunch with a friend, or watching a favorite TV show brings you happiness. Try different activities to see what you like. The more things you try, the more you will discover what you enjoy and what you do not.

As you take responsibility for your own happiness, your partner will take notice. He will be motivated to spend time with you because *your* happiness becomes *his* happiness.

As you master this attitude, you will feel more empowered. In fact, every time you take responsibility, you empower yourself to be a better person. By this

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approach, you will not view your partner as a means to your happiness; you will see him as a gift. He will be happier simply because you are happy yourself.

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FOR MEN:

Let your partner know her happiness is important to you. Be supportive of the things she likes to do. It might not be your “thing” to go for a walk or join a book club, but encourage her to do what she likes. Reassure her that you do not see her activities as taking time away from you, and there will still be plenty of time to spend together. Give her the reassurance she’s looking for. Women with children think they have to be available in case anyone needs them, so tell her it’s okay to spend time with a friend or alone.

Because of society’s image of what the perfect woman is supposed to look like, women are overly concerned with their looks. High on this list are weight, hair, and clothes. She believes her looks dictate how attractive she feels inside. Communicate that it is how attractive she feels, and not how attractive she looks, that matters. Help her understand this concept. She doesn’t understand because she was not

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taught this growing up. In fact, quite the opposite. Tell her what you find attractive about her.

Taking responsibility for personal happiness comes easily for men, yet women struggle with this one. Helping your partner with this will pay big dividends for you in the long run.