

PDF Summary: **How to Be an Adult in Relationships, by David Richo**

**Book Summary: Learn the key points in
minutes.**

Below is a preview of the Shortform book summary of *How to Be an Adult in Relationships* by David Richo. [Read the full comprehensive summary at Shortform.](#)

1-Page PDF Summary of How to Be an Adult in Relationships

What's the secret to a long-lasting, loving relationship? Therapist and self-help author David Richo says the secret is *mindful loving*—a compassionate, realistic approach to love based on the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. In *How to Be an Adult in Relationships*, Richo explains how mindful loving can improve your emotional health, your relationships, and the world you live in.

In this guide, you'll learn about the foundations of mindful loving, how to overcome the emotional wounds that hold you back from loving yourself and others mindfully, and how to use it to build a successful, healthy relationship...and eventually, a better world. We'll supplement Richo's ideas with actionable advice from other relationship experts, and we'll dive more deeply into some of the spiritual and psychological concepts underlying Richo's arguments.

(continued)...

Consequence #2: You Want Your Partner to Fill a Parental Role

Second, Richo says that when your childhood cravings for love go unfulfilled, you may grow up to seek out partners who you think will make up for your parents' shortcomings. For example, if your parents didn't engage with you enough, you might find yourself attracted to a person who pays you a lot of attention—maybe even too much.

According to Richo, this can lead to codependency—an over-reliance on your partner to fulfill too many of your needs. Codependency can put undue stress on your relationship: Your partner *can't* live up to your expectations or meet all your needs—that is *your* responsibility in adulthood. When your needs inevitably go unfulfilled, you may feel angry and create conflict with your partner.

(Shortform note: According to psychologists, parent-child dynamics between partners are unhealthy because they lead to *resentment*. If you're in the parent role, you may feel that your partner is incompetent and take on most of the responsibility in your relationship. As a result, [you might come to resent your partner for not doing their fair share](#). If you're in the child role, you inevitably give up some of your autonomy—for example, if your partner buys all your clothes, you won't have as much of a say in what you wear. As a result, [you might come to resent your partner for being too controlling](#).)

Consequence #3: You're Afraid of Intimacy

Third, **a lack of mindful love in your childhood can leave you feeling fearful of intimacy in adulthood.** Since your parents' love caused you pain, you might be afraid that romantic love will have the same effect. Richo explains that a fear of intimacy usually takes one of two forms: attachment or distance:

- You might get **too attached** to your partner if your parents were absent in major ways during your childhood—even if it was for a necessary reason, like having to take frequent business trips. According to Richo, overattachment makes you cling to your

partner because you're afraid you can't handle the potential end of the relationship.

- You might be **too distant** from your partner if your parents mistreated or abused you—you might now associate intimacy with being dominated, hurt, or exploited. As a result, you might be afraid that the relationship will limit your freedom and security, and you might pull away from your partner.

Your Attachment Style Determines How You Cope With Intimacy Fears

Recall that secure attachment is what enables you to feel reliably safe and connected enough for intimate relationships. If you don't have a secure attachment style, then you have an *insecure* attachment style: You're fearful of intimacy because your previous relationships taught you that you *can't* trust your loved ones to reliably be there for you.

Insecure attachment is fairly common, but it can be difficult to recognize because it comes in different forms. Psychologists generally suggest that there are three insecure attachment styles, which cope with fear of intimacy in different ways.

- [If you distance yourself from your partner, you likely have an avoidant attachment style.](#) You may feel uncomfortable being emotionally vulnerable, need extra personal space, and prioritize your independence over a committed relationship.
- [If you get too attached to your partner, you likely have an ambivalent attachment style.](#) You may struggle with feelings of insecurity and jealousy, have a hard time maintaining healthy relationship boundaries, and prioritize your relationship to the point of neglecting other major parts of your life.
- [If you often find yourself sabotaging or ending your relationships prematurely, you may have a disorganized](#)

[attachment style](#). As a result of childhood trauma or abuse, people with a disorganized attachment style *crave yet repel intimacy* because they're deeply afraid that intimacy inevitably leads to serious harm. They may pursue relationships but behave erratically and withdraw to avoid the possibility of getting hurt.

How to Heal Your Childhood Wounds and Grow Emotionally

Richo says that you can overcome your childhood wounds and reach emotional maturity by learning to mindfully love *yourself*.

Loving yourself leads to maturity because it gives you a strong sense of self-worth and a sense of responsibility for meeting your own needs. (Shortform note: This process—giving yourself the love your parents couldn't—is commonly known as *reparenting yourself*. Reparenting yourself involves, essentially, treating yourself like a parent *should* treat their child: keeping them safe, loved, and equipped with the skills and support they need to thrive. As you take care of this “inner child,” you'll heal her wounds—and will [stop repeating unhealthy patterns and behaviors that stemmed from an impulse to soothe your inner child's pain](#). Instead, you'll start to make rational, adult decisions that are *good* for you.)

Richo suggests three key self-love practices that can help you mature: *recognizing your inherent lovability, setting healthy boundaries with others, and compassionately validating yourself*.

Self-Love Practice #1: Recognize Your Inherent Lovability

Recall that Richo says that all living things—including *you*—are inherently lovable. **According to Richo, it's important to see yourself as inherently lovable because this helps you *treat yourself with love*.** You'll be more inclined to take good care of yourself—for example, by speaking to yourself kindly—and less inclined to accept unloving treatment from anyone, yourself included.

(Shortform note: In [Radical Acceptance](#), Tara Brach explains that most people find it hard to access their inherent lovability because they feel

ashamed and guilty about past mistakes. She recommends moving past these barriers with [self-forgiveness: the practice of welcoming your own feelings, acknowledging the good parts of yourself, and moving forward with greater compassion](#). This process teaches you that your mistakes don't make you a bad person—you're still capable of goodness and love, [so you're still inherently lovable](#).)

Self-Love Practice #2: Set Healthy Boundaries With Others

While it was your parents' job to keep you safe as a child, in adulthood that responsibility is yours alone. Richo says that to protect yourself from physical and emotional harm, **you have to learn to set healthy boundaries**. Boundaries are the expectations you have about the kinds of behavior you will and won't tolerate from others. For example, if you're monogamous, you might not be comfortable with your partner flirting with other people.

Before you can be ready for a relationship, you should have a general sense of what your boundaries are and feel capable of enforcing them.

(Shortform note: In [Set Boundaries, Find Peace](#), Nedra Glover Tawwab says that [setting boundaries is a three-step process](#): First, identify your standards for how people should treat you physically and socially. Then, clearly communicate your boundaries during uncomfortable situations. Finally, reinforce your boundaries by restating them when they're violated and setting consequences for repeat offenses.)

Self-Love Practice #3: Compassionately Validate Yourself

Richo's third practice for reaching emotional maturity is **facing your childhood wounds with compassionate validation: Acknowledge the ways you were hurt and underloved in childhood, and lovingly address your own pain**. This process shows you that your parents' inability to love you well was not your fault—that in fact, you deserve and are capable of receiving love from those who know how to love well, including yourself. As a result, your sense of self-worth *and* your self-efficacy—your ability to meet your own needs and advocate for yourself—*increase*.

Ricoh says there are four essential steps to processing your childhood wounds with compassionate validation:

1. Remember the painful things that have happened to you.
2. Fully feel the complicated emotions, like sorrow and fear, that accompanied those experiences.
3. Be grateful that your childhood wounds made you resilient.
4. Forgive those who hurt you and extend compassion to others who are in pain.

Tips From Trauma Experts on Healing Your Childhood Wounds

Healing from your childhood wounds can be a long, complicated, and painful process, especially if your wounds are severe and extensive. To help you make the most of Richo's advice for healing, we've compiled advice from trauma experts that you can apply to each step of the process:

1) You can avoid getting bogged down by difficult feelings, which can lead to depression, [by giving yourself some extra TLC and accepting care from others as you heal.](#)

Psychologists recommend talking to your loved ones about your feelings, taking good care of yourself physically, and connecting with those with similar experiences by joining support groups or reading others' stories of grief and healing.

2) You do have to remember your own pain in order to heal—but with severe trauma, [it's also necessary to have others witness and respond compassionately to your pain.](#) If you experienced childhood trauma, you may want to seek out a therapist who can help you process your memories without getting overwhelmed.

3) If you had traumatic childhood experiences, [you might be afraid of feeling your feelings.](#) If that's the case, [grounding](#)

[exercises](#), which help you feel safe and connected to your present reality, may help you overcome that fear.

4) Although Richo says you should be grateful that your wounds made you resilient, some psychologists argue that [trauma doesn't actually build resilience—it undermines it](#). Instead of attributing your resilience to trauma, try taking [a more proactive approach to increasing it](#) by working on your mental health and establishing support systems for yourself.

5) Richo says you should forgive those who hurt you because forgiveness and love for your adversaries are [important ideas in the Buddhist tradition](#), but some psychologists note that [forgiveness requires working through the issue with the person who hurt you](#), which isn't always possible. If you can't forgive, that's OK—you can still move on by processing your feelings and giving yourself time to heal.

The Mature Approach to Choosing the Right Partner

According to Richo, **once you've emotionally matured and learned to love yourself, you'll be ready for a healthy relationship**. You'll only want what's good for you—so you'll take time to consider whether a new relationship would be healthy before you commit to it. As a result, you'll have stronger relationships from the get-go.

To take an emotionally mature approach to determining whether a potential partner is right for you, Richo recommends you take into account three factors:

1) Compatibility: Determine whether you and your love interest have compatible values and life goals.

(Shortform note: In most long-term relationships, compatibility shifts over time for two reasons: First, you're both putting your best foot forward in the early stages, so you might not notice some incompatibilities right away. Second, people change—and so do their values and goals. According to some experts, [relationships thrive when couples stay](#)

[committed to loving each other despite changes in compatibility](#)—so a compatible level of *commitment* may be the most important thing to be on the lookout for.)

2) Availability: Determine whether you and your love interest have the capacity for trust, intimacy, and commitment, and whether you're located near enough to each other to sustain a relationship in person.

(Shortform note: In long-distance relationships, [it can be hard to maintain trust, communication, and intimacy](#); but that doesn't mean long-distance relationships are destined to fail. Usually, it just takes some extra work to ensure both partners feel securely connected to each other.)

3) Maturity: Determine whether you and your love interest are emotionally mature or willing to work on maturing together—if either of you are in the throes of addiction, mentally ill, violent, or desperate for a relationship to complete you, Richo says you should prioritize resolving those issues before you start dating.

(Shortform note: You may feel like you need to have *all* your issues figured out before you can have a healthy relationship, but that's not the case. According to researchers, [most people develop the relationship skills they need during the course of their relationships](#) by practicing with their partners and giving each other room to grow.)

Part 3: How Mindful Love Strengthens and Sustains Relationships

Once you have the emotional maturity to *be* a good partner and *find* a good partner, Richo says, **you'll create relationships that are not only strong but also continue to help you heal and mature.**

In this section, we'll discuss how mindfully loving relationships encourage you to grow and become more secure. Then, we'll explore how mindful loving helps you navigate the changes that occur naturally over the course of a relationship.

Mindfully Loving Relationships Encourage You to Grow

Richo says that **mindfully loving relationships encourage psychological growth in three ways**: They provide the opportunity to process your issues, make compassionate validation possible, and improve your self-esteem.

Growth Factor #1: Relationships Provide Opportunities for Processing

Mindfully loving relationships are a space where you can explore and overcome the consequences of your childhood wounds. Richo explains that during the course of a relationship, you and your partner will inevitably trigger old memories of emotional pain. When this happens between two mindful adults, you can healthily address the conflict *and* the inner turmoil that has followed you from childhood into adulthood.

For example, if your partner snaps at you because the house is a mess, you might be upset—not just because your partner snapped at you, but also because it reminds you of all the times your parents snapped at you as a kid. If you're both mindfully loving, you can process and work through it: You tell your partner how it makes you feel when they snap at you, and they validate your feelings. Then, together, you figure out healthier ways to deal with conflict in the future.

(Shortform note: When your partner triggers your childhood wounds, you may experience [intense negative emotions and the impulse to lash out](#). Since lashing out can damage your relationship, learning how to better cope with triggers benefits you *and* your partner. One thing psychologists recommend when you're triggered is to [ask your partner to give you some space](#) so you can process your feelings and figure out a rational approach to the conflict.)

Growth Factor #2: Relationships Provide Compassionate Support

Richo says that in addition to helping you work through your childhood wounds, **your partner can support you through your *adult* wounds.** For example, if you feel hurt after the end of a friendship, your partner might invite you to express that pain and make an effort to show you some extra affection when you need it. Compassionate validation from

your partner ensures that you don't feel alone and overwhelmed in your pain—instead, you feel connected and supported, which makes pain more tolerable.

(Shortform note: Compassionate support doesn't just reduce emotional pain—it has a positive physical effect, too. Research demonstrates that emotional support from a romantic partner can [help you tolerate pain better](#), [make you feel less stressed](#), and [influence you to make healthier choices for yourself](#). So, in the long run, receiving compassionate support from your partner [can help you live longer](#).)

Growth Factor #3: Relationships Improve Your Self-Esteem

Intimate relationships also improve your self-esteem because when someone shows a romantic interest in you, it proves to you that you're lovable. And, as the relationship deepens, you reveal your flaws and weaknesses, and you continue receiving your partner's love, you'll affirm that you're worthy of love regardless of your imperfections.

(Shortform note: Partners, friends, and other loved ones *boost* your self-esteem [by opening your eyes to your own good qualities](#) with praise, encouragement, or acceptance of who you are. These boosts can help assuage your insecurities, but ultimately, your self-esteem comes down to how *you* feel about *yourself*. So, while your mindfully loving partner should contribute to your self-esteem to some extent, it's important that you work on [accepting yourself regardless of what others think of you](#).)

Mindful Loving Helps Your Relationship Withstand Change

In addition to supporting your healthy changes, mindful loving helps you *withstand* changes. Richo argues that all successful relationships happen in three phases—the honeymoon phase, the discordant phase, and the devotion phase. **Mindful loving enables you to navigate and transition between these phases and transition between them in a way that makes your relationship stronger.**

(Shortform note: Richo claims that there are three phases, but other experts say there could be as many as [four](#) or [five](#) if you count your initial attraction to each other and the peaceful period between the

honeymoon and discordant phases. Across these different formulations, however, the general trend of the relationship is the same: You meet, fall in blissful love, gradually get to know each other better as you overcome conflict together, and maintain a steady commitment.)

Mindful Loving in the Honeymoon Phase

In the honeymoon phase, romance is at a high and you express mindful love easily. You act like the best version of yourself, and so does your partner, so you're both swept away by the illusion that your partner is perfect or nearly perfect. As a result, it's easy for you and your partner to practice Gratitude, Respect, Engagement, Attention, and Tenderness (GREAT) with each other and affirm one another's inherent lovability. This helps you build a mutually loving foundation upon which the rest of the relationship can rest.

(Shortform note: Neuroscientists say that [the high you experience during the honeymoon stage is caused by physiological changes in your brain](#). You're so enthralled by your partner that just looking at or thinking about them activates the chemicals in your brain responsible for desire, connection, and euphoric feelings. That's why it's so easy to practice the GREAT model with each other in this stage—[these neurochemicals make you feel good, so you're motivated to keep being intimate with your partner](#).)

Mindful Loving in the Discordant Phase

Richo says that **you and your partner will inevitably leave the honeymoon stage and enter the discordant phase** when you begin to have conflict with each other. In this stage, you'll see each other as flawed for the first time.

According to Richo, **conflict can be resolved more easily and strengthen your relationship if you approach it in a mindfully loving way**: as an opportunity to get to know and accept each other more fully.

(Shortform note: The mindfully loving approach to conflict doesn't just strengthen your relationship—it also supports your physical health.

Studies show that [if conflict happens too often or for too long in your relationship, it may lead to chronic stress](#). Stress can make you sick—it lowers your immunity to illnesses, causes inactive health issues to flare up, and can result in chronic pains like frequent headaches. In contrast, [couples who resolve conflict in a healthy, timely way are healthier in the long run.](#))

To resolve conflicts in a mindfully loving way, Rico says you have to put your ego aside and focus on cooperating with your partner instead of on winning the argument. More specifically, you and your partner should listen to and validate each other's feelings about the conflict, practicing each of the five components of the GREAT model all the while.

For example, say that your partner is upset with you because they feel like they do more of the household chores than you. To practice the GREAT model in this situation, you could:

- Engage with them by giving them your full attention while you talk about the issue.
- Express gratitude, thanking them for everything they do around the house.
- Express tenderness by giving them a hug while you thank them.
- Affirm their strengths by acknowledging how much they do around the house and how they're so good at it.
- Show that you respect their time, feelings, and effort by suggesting (and sticking to) a plan to more evenly share the workload.

(Shortform note: [One popular strategy for mindful conflict resolution is to use "I" statements](#)—statements that focus on your feelings rather than the other person's actions. "I" statements allow you to express yourself without placing the blame for your feelings on your partner, which can lead to further conflict and resentment. For example, in the above scenario, your partner might say, "I feel overwhelmed by the amount of housework I do" instead of accusing you of not doing enough, which will elicit a more positive response from you.)

Mindful Loving in the Devotion Phase

In the devotion phase, you commit to maintaining a healthy relationship and loving each other fully—imperfections and all. According to Richo, **mindful loving is key to the devotion phase because it helps you give each other the grace you'll need to stay together through life changes.** There will be times in each of your lives when you need to receive more love than you're capable of giving. For example, if you become seriously ill, you'll be more reliant on your partner's support, and you won't have the energy to return the same amount of support.

If you want your relationship to last, you'll both need to keep in mind that your partner is still deserving of your love even when they're not at their best.

(Shortform note: Grace helps you reach the devotional stage of relationships, but psychologists warn that *repeatedly* having to give your partner grace—with no resulting change in their behavior—is [a red flag of abuse](#), especially when their behavior harms you. Keep in mind that grace doesn't entitle your partner to violate your boundaries. It's a *reciprocal* commitment to support each other through tough times and give one another room to grow.)

Mindful Loving Helps You End Relationships Gracefully

According to Richo, **mindful loving helps you recognize when it's time to end a relationship.** He says that it's time to break up when the relationship is no longer viable because the seriousness of your issues surpasses your or your partner's ability to deal with them—continuing the relationship would hurt you or your partner.

(Shortform note: To make letting go easier for both you *and* your ex, take mindfully loving (GREAT) actions during your breakup. For example, to show respect, break up with your ex [in person as soon as you realize it's over](#). During the breakup, you can also *engage with* and *affirm* your ex by [having an honest conversation about both of your feelings](#)—that way, both of you can walk away with a better understanding of the relationship and why it ended, which will help you process and grieve.)

Part 4: Loving Well Means Loving the World

At this point, you know why mindful love is so important to strong relationships and may have started bringing GREAT aspects to your own relationships. This sets you up to strive for ***universal loving-kindness***, **the Buddhist tenet that requires compassion for all living beings**.

According to Richo, this is the ultimate goal of learning how to love mindfully. Romantic relationships teach you to honor your partner's inherent lovability despite flaws and conflicts—he sees this as a small-scale way to practice extending compassion to *everyone*.

Why You Should Strive for Universal Loving-Kindness

Richo says that universal loving-kindness should be your ultimate goal because it has two major life-improving benefits: It gives your life meaning and it improves society.

First, Richo says that **universal loving-kindness compels you to help others when they're suffering, which will make your life feel more meaningful**. For example, if you see that your neighbor is struggling to afford food, you might practice universal loving-kindness by helping them buy groceries. You may not be able to solve world hunger on your own, but you can be part of the solution in small ways.

(Shortform note: Research suggests that [helping others increases your sense of meaning because it strengthens your connection to others](#).

Connection is a basic psychological need—humans are an interdependent, social species. When you help someone else, you fill an important role in their life, which [reinforces that interdependence and cements your social bond with them](#). As a result, you have the sense that your life matters—you did something meaningful for someone, and you belong here.)

Second, **universal loving-kindness is necessary for the well-being of global society**. Because loving-kindness emphasizes our common humanity, it enables you to relate to others as equals and overcome conflict collaboratively, rather than destructively.

(Shortform note: [This principle is the basis of many religions, not just Buddhism](#)—lots of people believe in the power of love to change the world, and many religious rules and practices function to create supportive, loving communities. [There's also some scientific merit to this idea](#)—our institutions and policies may be more effective if they're informed by love for all humanity.)

Get Started With Loving-Kindness Meditation

Even if you haven't yet mastered the art of mindful loving, you can still improve your capacity for universal loving-kindness through loving-kindness meditation. Although this is traditionally a Buddhist practice, some [psychologists recommend it for anybody who wants to feel happier, healthier, and more strongly connected to others](#). Here's [one way to practice it](#):

- Create an intentional space by sitting quietly, relaxing your body, and focusing on your breath.
- Imagine what perfect inner peace would feel like. Once you find that feeling, allow yourself to dwell on it—really feel the warmth, comfort, and love that inner peace entails.
- Now, focus your attention on a loved one. Wish that they'll have the same sense of inner peace you're experiencing right now.
- Continue to generate compassionate well-wishes for other people you know.
- Then, focus your attention on people you don't know, like global populations that are suffering, and compassionately wish the best for them, too.

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