

EXCERPT FROM

THE
Relationship
HANDBOOK

- ✓ Family
- ✓ Romantic
- ✓ Professional
- ✓ Friendship

How to
**THE CHALLENGE OF ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

and
improve
Every Relationship
in Your Life

KEVIN B. BURK

THE
Relationship
HANDBOOK

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Astrology: Understanding the Birth Chart
(Llewellyn, 2001)

The Complete Node Book
(Llewellyn, 2003)

The Relationship Workbook
(Serendipity Press, 2004)

THE
Relationship
HANDBOOK

**How to Understand
and Improve
Every Relationship
in Your Life**

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THE RELATIONSHIP HANDBOOK

«PART 2»
Romantic
Relationships

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THE CHALLENGE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

We have hundreds of different relationships in our lives. We have relationships with our parents, with our siblings, and with our extended families. We have relationships with our friends, with our neighbors, and with our co-workers. We have relationships with our mail carriers, our garbage men, our grocery clerks, and our dry cleaners. Each of these relationships is unique and complex, and yet we seem to be able to navigate them with relative ease. So why is it that our romantic relationships are so challenging?

Why do so many of us spend so much time worrying about our romantic relationships? Why is it, in fact, that when we hear the word “relationship,” we almost automatically assume that it’s referring to a romantic or sexual relationship?

And here’s an even better question: why is it that when we hear the word “relationship” not only do we assume it’s referring to a romantic or sexual relationship, but we also *all picture the exact same relationship*?

We’re able to navigate through the other kinds of relationships because we have a much wider range of ideas of how those relationships should look. We have so much difficulty with romantic relationships because *we only have one idea of how romantic relationships should look*.

THE PICTURE ON THE BOX

When we go shopping in the relationship supermarket (as it were), we can choose from a wide variety of different brands, sizes and shapes for every other kind of relationship. The “friendship” aisle has thousands of boxes to choose from—and you can easily pick and choose the qualities that best suit you. We even have a variety of family relationships to choose from. The romantic relationship aisle, however, is another story.

When it comes to romantic relationships, we only have one option. There are no competing products. The picture on the box shows us what society considers to be the ideal relationship, which is also held out to be the only truly acceptable kind of relationship. The marketing and advertising campaign for this brand of relationship is so pervasive and so much a part of our lives, most of the time we’re not even aware that we only have one brand of romantic relationship to choose from. If we don’t care for this particular brand of relationship, we still have to buy it and then make our own adjustments to suit our individual taste.

The product placement for this brand of relationship is truly staggering. We see it everywhere we look. It’s on television, in movies, in books and magazines. We’re led to believe that it has magical qualities and can completely transform our lives. In fact, quite a bit of the marketing for this particular relationship involves hype and myths and unrealistic expectations.

To complicate matters even more, the picture on the box that we so admire may not have anything at all to do with what’s actually *inside* the box. What’s inside the box is our Marriage Blueprint. We all buy a romantic relationship kit, and we’re told that when we’re done, we should have something that looks like the picture on the box. But the Marriage Blueprint inside the box rarely relates to the picture on the box. It’s almost as if we’re trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle, but the finished puzzle doesn’t look anything like the illustration on the cover. Not only does this make it more difficult to fit the pieces together in the first place, but when we’re done, we’re unhappy with the result because it’s not what we thought we were getting. And don’t forget, we may not have even *wanted* the picture on the box in the first place.

So what is the picture on the box? What do we automatically picture when we think of a romantic relationship? *A heterosexual, monogamous life partner.*

This is the only model any of us have for a romantic relationship. We each have a core belief that a heterosexual, monogamous life partner is the very *definition* of a romantic relationship, and that in a very real sense, our lives are simply preparing us for the point when we will meet our heterosexual, monogamous life partner and get married.

The heterosexual, monogamous life partner is our relationship ideal, and when we fall short of this ideal, we feel emotional, psychological, spiritual and even physical discomfort. The picture on the box—our cultural core beliefs about romantic relationships—is one of the biggest reasons that finding a healthy, satisfying romantic relationship is so difficult for so many people. The fact is, unless we're a member of a very small minority of individuals who truly want the picture on the box *and* who were lucky enough to find their heterosexual, monogamous life partner at a *very early age* we will struggle with relationship issues.

What the picture on our box looks like depends on when and where we grew up. If we grew up in America in the 1950s and 1960s, it looks like Ozzie and Harriet Nelson or Ward and June Cleaver. If we grew up in the 1970s, it's more likely to be Mike and Carol Brady. In the 1980s, it's the Huxtables from *The Cosby Show*, or the Keatons, from *Family Ties*.

Are our lives really that influenced by popular culture? Absolutely. When we watched these shows as children, they reinforced our core beliefs about what adult romantic relationships were supposed to look like. They not only supported the idea that we need to find a heterosexual, monogamous life partner, but they also showed us what it should look like when we find one. We understand that these television relationships are not real. We laughed at them then, and we certainly laugh at the memory of them now. And yet, we still expect our adult relationships to fit that mold, and we still struggle with disappointment when they don't.

Heterosexual

The most obvious element of the picture on the box is that all romantic relationships must be heterosexual. Gay men, lesbians, bisexuals—everyone, in fact, who has ever felt that they were romantically, spiritually or

sexually attracted to someone of their own gender—have to confront this core conditioning head-on. The challenge isn't about gaining the acceptance and support of others. The real challenge is gaining acceptance and support from ourselves.

Since we are conditioned from birth that the only socially acceptable romantic relationships occur between men and women, we automatically feel that if we're not attracted to someone of the opposite sex, something must be wrong with us. This struggle for self-acceptance requires a tremendous amount of energy, and often it is buried so deeply that we're not even aware of it. Anyone who has ever been in a same-sex relationship must acknowledge this. Whatever their conscious beliefs, they must overcome the core societal programming that tells them that their relationships are not acceptable.

Today, society is far more accepting of same-sex relationships. In fact, we're even seeing some positive representations of same-sex relationships in the media and popular culture. While this makes a huge difference to children growing up today and is helping them to create a more flexible core belief about relationships, it doesn't help the rest of us. *Our* core beliefs were formed when *we* were children. The picture on the box may be changing for the younger generations, but *we're* stuck with our original version.

If we happen to be attracted to people of the opposite gender, we don't have to worry about the expectations of the “heterosexual” part of the picture on the box. But don't get too excited—we've still got the “monogamous” and “life partner” issues to deal with.

Monogamous

Monogamy is a very valid, supportive choice for many individuals. But monogamous relationships are not the *only* type of committed, romantic relationships—nor are they necessarily the most valid or enduring. What happens more often than we would like to believe is that one or both partners start to realize that monogamy isn't really working for them. Since monogamy is the foundation of the institution of marriage—not to mention a cornerstone of our core relationship beliefs—the couple can't discuss these feelings

openly. This leads to a breakdown in communication. They begin to lose the emotional, psychological and spiritual connections that drew them together in the first place. Eventually the only thing keeping the relationship together *is* monogamy—or at least the illusion of monogamy. The process of emotional separation is accelerated when one or both partners choose to engage in extra-marital affairs. At this point, they're probably headed for a divorce—and the only thing stopping them is their core belief that their heterosexual, monogamous relationship is supposed to last a lifetime. The distinction we need to make is that *monogamy* is not the same thing as *fidelity*.

Monogamy vs. Fidelity

The monogamous aspect of the Marriage Blueprint makes us assume that we can find one person who can meet all of our emotional, spiritual, social, intimate, and sexual needs. This is a lot to expect! Let me be perfectly clear that I'm not questioning monogamy in any way. Monogamy is a perfectly valid choice in romantic relationships. But we don't expect our romantic partners to meet every one of our needs. This is why we maintain our friendships even when we're in a romantic relationship. We do, however, tend to put the most emphasis on the sexual needs in our romantic relationships. In fact, a monogamous relationship is defined by sex. Sexual attraction is certainly a key component to our romantic relationships—it's often what brings us together with our romantic partners in the first place. What keeps us together, however, is love, trust, intimacy, companionship and support.

The longer we're in a romantic relationship, the less important sex becomes. When we find someone who makes us feel truly safe and loved, someone with whom we enjoy spending time and sharing our lives, that's what really matters. If our partners aren't able to meet our sexual needs, what then?

This question has become more pressing since the Sexual Revolution. Sex is not entirely—or even primarily—about procreation anymore. Sex is fun. Or at least, we think sex should be fun. Many of us still have quite a bit of guilt and shame associated with the things that we find truly arousing. We're often reluctant to have a frank, open discussion with our romantic partners about our sexual desires. We may be afraid of what our partners would think of us if

they knew what we really liked. And we may be afraid of what we would think of our partners if they were actually willing to fulfill our desires.

What we truly need in our romantic relationships is fidelity. What we value the most in our romantic relationships is the level of intimacy and safety that we share exclusively with our romantic partners. We express this intimacy physically with our partners when we make love. But let's be completely honest—there's a very real difference between “making love” and “fucking our brains out.” We can have sex without experiencing deep, soulful intimate bonds. Sometimes, sex is about giving in to our most primal, animalistic, physical urges. Sometimes we can experience this with the person with whom we share our most intimate connections, and sometimes we can't. But sooner or later, the heat of passion cools in every relationship. When we buy into the belief that we have to trade passion for intimacy, we don't experience either one.

The alternative to a monogamous relationship is an “open” relationship. Open relationships are different from “arrangements” or “affairs.” In open relationships, both individuals openly discuss the fact that they are not sexually exclusive with each other. Open relationships have very clear guidelines and boundaries for the extra-curricular sexual encounters. Some couples only “play” together, inviting a third person to join them. Some are free to “play” with others individually, although they may reserve certain activities for their primary partner. What makes these relationships work is communication, and the understanding that sometimes sex is just sex. The relationship maintains fidelity without monogamy.

Gay men have the most experience with open relationships, because, at least at the time I'm writing this, marriage is not a legal option for same-sex couples. Heterosexual couples often find open relationships more challenging, particularly when they've invested in the institution of marriage. Our society places a tremendous stigma on extra-marital sex, even when it's something that both individuals want. Even so, we would do well to consider that in a time when more than half of all marriages end in divorce, many “open” relationships continue to endure, lasting 20, 30, 40 years and longer.

Life Partner

Divorce, such a common and socially accepted act today, was a far more serious choice even 20 years ago. To bring up another pop-culture example, on the Mary Tyler Moore show, Mary Tyler Moore's character, Mary Richards, was originally conceived as a divorced woman getting a new start. The show's producers felt that the character of Mary would be more accepted by the viewing audience if she had never been married.¹

The "life partner" aspect of the picture on the box is the part that is changing the most dramatically. Anyone born after the mid-1970s will have experienced divorce as a part of their lives. It's far more likely that they will have direct experience with divorce, and they will have experienced divorce through the media as well. If anything, the generations born in the 1980s and 1990s (and beyond) may not even believe that romantic relationships can last a lifetime. Not only won't their Marriage Blueprint include the lifetime expectations, but the picture on the box won't show this possibility, either.

If we actually want a heterosexual, monogamous life partner, we should be fine—as long as we find one while we're still young. This is an implied part of the picture on the box, and it is changing gradually. Even so, most women still feel that they should have found their prince by the time they're about 25, and men feel they should be settling down and starting a family by the time they're 30. It wasn't so long ago that any unmarried man over the age of 35 was simply assumed to be gay, and an unmarried woman over the age of 30 could look forward to a long and meaningful relationship with her cats. The statistic that a single woman over 35 has more chance of being struck by lightning than getting married still pops up from time to time to terrorize women everywhere, and reinforce our belief in the picture on the box.

Sure, we can laugh at these ideas now—but even with our new perspectives and beliefs, we each still carry some element of these fears. We're afraid of being alone.

¹ Actually, the producers were concerned about two things. First, they were concerned that America wasn't ready to see a divorced woman in prime time. But they were also concerned that if Mary Tyler Moore played a divorced woman, that America would think she had divorced Dick Van Dyke, who played her husband, Rob Petrie on the *Dick Van Dyke Show*.

DANGER: EXPLODING MARKETING MYTHS AHEAD

Not only are we conditioned to define our romantic relationships in terms of the picture on the box, but we're also the victims of a huge marketing campaign designed to sell us the myth of the box. Each of these myths makes it more difficult for us to find a partner and build the kind of relationship that we truly want. Let's take a few moments to explode these myths.

Soulmates

One of the most popular myths is that in order to be in a romantic relationship, we need to first find our "soulmate." We're told that our "soulmate" is our perfect match—the person with whom we will experience love at first sight, and an emotional and sexual connection only found in romance novels. If you've ever felt that you were "destined to be with someone," or that you've "been together in past lives, so we're meant to be together again in this one," you've bought into the "soulmate" myth.

A "soulmate" is the metaphysical equivalent of "second cousin," and applies to any member of our immediate soul family. Our soul families have over 1,700 members (and there's never enough potato salad at the family reunions). At any given time there may be hundreds of our "soulmates" on Earth. Just because we happen to be soulmates with someone doesn't mean that we're "destined" to form any kind of relationship with them on Earth, romantic or otherwise. We can, of course; many happy couples also share soul connections. But it's not a requirement.

The "soulmate" myth also encourages the belief that we can only ever find one person with whom we will be truly happy, and that whenever we find that person, no matter how content we may be in our current relationship, we must move heaven and earth to be with them.

A number of years ago, Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan made a film titled, *You've Got Mail*—a modern version of a very charming Jimmy Stewart movie called *The Shop Around the Corner*. The story involves two people who can't stand each other professionally, but who meet through a lonely hearts club and fall in love through the exchange of their anonymous letters. The original film is utterly charming (and was the basis for an even more charming

and elegant musical in the 1960s, *She Loves Me*). In the modern version, they meet in an America Online chat room, and exchange e-mails instead of letters. But the changes in *You've Got Mail* involve more than technological advances. The alterations to the plot reinforce the "Soulmate" myth and send incredibly destructive messages.

In *The Shop Around the Corner*, the two main characters are both *single*. In *You've Got Mail*, both Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan are in perfectly acceptable relationships with other people. The only thing lacking in these relationships is that they're not *Hollywood* relationships. They don't come with sweeping orchestrations and fireworks and the promise of happily ever after. Instead, they take effort, compromise and negotiation to keep them going. In other words, they're normal, healthy romantic relationships. But, alas, they lack that certain spark, and therefore, we're told, they're not enough. Tom Hanks, for example, realizes that he wouldn't want to be stuck in an elevator with his girlfriend (as if that's some kind of barometer of compatibility). Meg Ryan's boyfriend gets a crush on a woman in his field, and instead of addressing why his needs aren't being met in his current relationship, he and Meg simply call it quits. Obviously, it wasn't meant to be, because they didn't have that spark.

The only remotely healthy element of *You've Got Mail* is that it takes five or six months (which, of course, pass in a matter of minutes on screen) before Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks actually get together. The film goes to great lengths to make sure that we don't believe that either one has left their relationship for the other. There's no hint of infidelity here. However, the underlying message is far more destructive and insidious: If we're not completely happy in our relationships, we should simply end them, because we could meet someone better at any time.

Happily Ever After

The "Happily Ever After" myth is so much a part of our culture and our consciousness that we often take it for granted, whether it's a fairy tale that we remember from our childhood (or that we read to our children), or the ending of the latest blockbuster film where the guy/girl finally gets the

girl/guy and they ride off into the sunset/Manhattan skyline/Crab Nebula. Even Shakespeare's comedies all end with the principal characters getting married (the "happily ever after" part is implied).

To return to the example of *You've Got Mail*, by the time Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan get together, the movie's over. We're told that they're obviously meant for each other. We've been rooting for them to get together for the entire film—that's how romantic comedies work. And in the end, when they head off into the sunset, we just know that they're going to be spending the rest of their lives together in blissful monogamy.

But why on earth should we assume that? What about either one of these characters has changed in the previous hour and a half? They weren't willing to work through the challenges in their last relationships, why should we think that they'd behave any differently in this one? What happens once they've gotten to know each other better? Did they suddenly forget how annoying they found each other at first? Sure, that kind of thing is fuel for sexual attraction, but eventually, it stops being sexy and just starts being aggravating.

Is "happily ever after" possible? Of course it is. But it takes *work!!*

The Myth of Compatibility, or "Hey, Baby, What's Your Sign?"

Much of popular astrology seems to focus on relationships and compatibility, and every bit of information about astrology and relationships that you're likely to encounter is completely worthless. This must seem strange, coming from a professional astrologer and counselor—particularly one who has included an entire Appendix on astrology and relationships in this very book. Let me explain.

The first problem with most popular astrology books is that they are based on what is known as "sun sign" astrology. "Sun sign" astrology is to real astrology the way a paper airplane is to the Concorde. It's a simplified, stripped down version that is accessible to everyone, but it's only good for entertainment, and it won't get you where you want to go. Astrology

can be a very valuable tool for personal growth and insight. However, each individual has a unique chart, based on the date, time and location of their birth. The Sun is only one of ten “planets” in the chart, and while it’s certainly important, it’s not the only point to consider when looking at an individual’s personality. Whether you’re reading a daily horoscope column in the newspaper or skimming through an “astrological relationship guide” in a bookstore to find out if your 25-year marriage to a Leo is doomed by the stars, evaluating compatibility based on sun signs is exactly as valid as evaluating compatibility based on hair color.

Even if you practice astrology and are considering the two unique birth charts of two individuals, it’s difficult to evaluate compatibility. Ultimately, astrological “compatibility” has little to do with the success or length of the relationship. It’s not possible to predict how long a relationship will last using astrology—or anything else, for that matter. *Any* relationship can work. It doesn’t matter how well aligned the planets are, and it doesn’t matter if the two people have any kind of soul connections. The relative success of our relationships depends entirely on us.

NEW RELEASE

"THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS!"

THE Relationship HANDBOOK



How to Understand and Improve Every Relationship in Your Life

KEVIN B. BURK

The Relationship Handbook
How to Understand and Improve Every Relationship in Your Life

by

Kevin B. Burk

The first truly comprehensive guide to human relationships has finally arrived! *The Relationship Handbook* is guaranteed to help you to improve *every single relationship* in your life! Inside, you will learn the secrets to improving your romantic relationships, your family relationships, your professional relationships, and even your friendships!

Filled with practical, compassionate, often humorous but always useful advice, *The Relationship Handbook* guides you through the ins and outs of all human relationships.

The Relationship Handbook changes people's lives. In the words of one of the many participants of Kevin B. Burk's Relationship Workshops, **"This information makes my world a better place to live!"**

In The Relationship Handbook you will discover...

- ❖ The two most important needs in every relationship—and *why we're almost never aware of one of them!*
- ❖ How to move from fear into love and master our spiritual lessons.
- ❖ The three elements that define *every* romantic relationship.
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- ❖ The Relationship Definition Talk—the key to successful romantic relationships.
- ❖ Six steps that are guaranteed to improve *every* relationship in your life.
- ❖ ...and much more!

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