

Relationship Manual for Dr. Liz Powell

The idea behind a relationship manual is for a person to give the people they are dating/want to date the information those people need to understand them and “win” with them. This is intended to be a living document, so it will be changed and added to over time. If you have questions about anything here, please ask! I’d be happy to talk about it.

- **Conflict**

- I want to think about conflict as a time when we each try to understand where the other person is coming from
- We must both be open to being mistaken/wrong
- We must both hold space for the other person to ensure, as much as possible, that they feel heard
- Imagine us as two people sitting side by side, looking at the problem together, not two people facing each other and trying to win
- I want our goal to be finding solutions, not winning or being right. I want us both to come out of conflict feeling loved, seen, and understood
- We will both hurt each other, likely pretty badly. Our job is to work at learning from our conflicts to reduce them in the future, and to clean up any mess we create through our choices and actions
- Conflict is an opportunity to strengthen our foundation, but only if we both go in together, looking to build instead of tear down
- Accountability and responsibility are hugely important to me. I need us to both work hard at stepping into taking accountability when we hurt each other and to think about what making amends looks like beyond just apologies.
- Right now, I’m far more fragile than I used to be. I don’t like being this fragile. The last few years have seen a lot of really big upheaval in my life and as a result, I haven’t had a lot of reliable community to lean on, so I’m just generally under-resourced. I’m working on building up more supports and connections around me, but that takes some time. Until I’ve been able to do more of that, everything just feels like it’s much higher stakes than it used to.
 - Sometimes this increased fragility means that it takes less for me to get hurt, sometimes it means that it takes longer for me to move out of the hurt, and sometimes it means I have a harder time trusting apologies or other moves toward repair. I try to be mindful of when those struggles are happening and do what I can to consciously choose to trust and forgive and recover, but if it seems like I’m stuck in that spiral, please ask me if I’m spiraling so that I can figure out what I need to move to healthier patterns.

- **Therapy**

- I go to therapy, and I prefer to have people in my life who also go to therapy

- I am not YOUR therapist. If stuff keeps coming up that seems like it needs therapy, I'll ask you to get into therapy. This may be a deal-breaker for me
- If you've never been in therapy, it's unlikely I'll want to get deeply involved with you. If you think therapy is a crock, I don't want to be involved with you
- **Communication**
 - Aim to use I statements and non-blaming/shaming language when possible
 - If feelings are getting heated, we take a time out
 - Time out has a specific time when we circle back
 - We spend the time during the time out calming ourselves down so we can come back with clearer heads
 - Strike when the iron is cold - if emotions are hot, that's probably not the best time to hash things out
 - I much prefer volunteered information and proactive communication. I'm happy to ask about what's going on, but I much prefer when someone fills me in without me asking
 - If I only get information from asking, that won't work for me in the long term
 - I generally think that too much communication is just enough. And, it's also important to have some time in the relationship that is us enjoying each other, not just communicating
 - I prefer not to handle conflicts over text. Sometimes that can't be avoided, but I much prefer being face-to-face (or at least on video chat) for anything contentious
 - If my feelings are running high and it seems like I'm struggling to stick to my own values, initiating some touch or asking me if we can take some deep breaths together can be really helpful to calm my system down
 - I'm a terrible mind reader, and my brain is an ADHD brain that works differently than other brains, so I need you to tell me what you want and need. As much as possible I prefer for us to make direct asks rather than assumptions or hinting or passive communication.
- **Sex**
 - I'm a megasexual, so I don't tend to become romantically attracted to people with whom I don't have a good sexual connection
 - There isn't necessarily a required amount of sex for a relationship to work for me, but if there isn't some good sexual connection happening, my romantic feelings are likely to wane
 - In an ideal world, I'd have sex every 1-2 days. In a romantic connection, I'd probably like us to be having sex on a majority of our dates (though this almost always ebbs and flows with time)
 - I have sex with a lot of people. If that's going to bother you or if you're going to want me to not have sex with a lot of people to have sex with you, we shouldn't date.

- I'm happy to negotiate barrier use and testing to make sure we're both feeling good about the level of risk in our relationship
 - I tend to use condoms for vaginal and anal penetration with partners, gloves for all anal hand sex, and gloves for all hand sex at play parties. I am open to using barriers for oral sex depending on risk factors and each person's risk-aware sex preferences
 - I am, however, also a huge cum slut so I often try to have at least 1 connection where I can have un-barriered sex
 - I get tested every 2 months and am on PrEP. My testing is for gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, and HIV. I get tested yearly for Hep C.
 - I have a history of HSV-1 orally (cold sores, the last breakout was before the pandemic). I do not currently get tested for HSV-2 as my healthcare provider won't test without an active outbreak. If you do not want to risk getting HSV, we should not have sex.
 - I have an IUD and zero desire to ever carry a pregnancy to term.
- I have sex with people of all genders and all body types. I'm not okay with any weirdness about my having sex with people of any particular genders or with any particular bits of anatomy
- I have sex with sex workers and men who have sex with men. If you're not okay with that, we shouldn't have sex.

- **Time**

- In general, I tend to see folks I'm dating between twice a month and once a week.
 - If it's someone I'm interested in forming a deep romantic connection with, I'll likely want to see them once or twice a week.
- With long-term established partners, I tend to want to see them 1-3 times per week
- I currently work a very stressful day job, so on my work days and the nights before them, I tend to be unavailable. I also tend to be busy on Sundays, getting ready for the upcoming work week.
- I am not a morning person. I can make things happen in the morning when needed and with enough notice, but I am much more of an evening person.
- I need my sleep. If I get less than 7.5 hours of sleep in a night, I feel it. This means I'm usually wanting to go to sleep between 11pm-12am
- I try to be on time for things that are important to be punctual for (reservations, movies, flights, etc). I do have ADHD, so being punctual can be challenging for me when there aren't high stakes. I tend not to be more than 15 minutes late, but if my being late is going to be a big issue for you, please let me know upfront so I can plan things such that I can have systems in place to be on time. I will also need some grace and understanding from you when I am sometimes late. I'm not doing it on purpose, I promise!
- Because of ADHD, my brain doesn't understand linear time. Time for me moves very very differently than neurotypical folks. If I'm not understanding time the way

you are, it's because we don't have the same brains, so I need you to work with me to figure out what specifically you want/need so that I can figure out if I can offer that.

- I'm unlikely to generally want to spend 24/7 with someone for longer than a few days. I need my space and alone time, and I need time to be with other people and focus on other things.
 - An exception to this is trips/vacations with certain people. Even then, I may need some alone time during a trip that's longer than a couple of days.
- I can enjoy alone together time (or parallel activity time), quality time, or some combination thereof.
 - Quality time for me tends to be time when we're sharing about ourselves and connecting with each other. That can be with conversation or with having a shared experience, or even watching some shows or movies. If we're spending quality time, I prefer for us to limit time on our phones or explicitly negotiate how we're handling checking phones during quality time
 - If you know what you need for something to be quality time, please let me know. I have found that some folks find time that I considered to be quality time to not feel like quality time for them. I do best when I'm explicitly told what you want and need.

- **Landmines**

- I've had a fair amount of trauma in my life, and I've worked on it and am working through it
- I tend to resist someone trying to give me unrequested advice or telling me what I should do, or judging my choices, because of some of this trauma
- I often worry that I am being used for sex/star fucked/valued as a fuck buddy but not a partner
- Comments about my weight are often really damaging for me, as is any diet talk or talk about weight loss
- If we do anal play where I'm receiving, I need it to be slow with lots of prep and lube due to trauma from a former partner
- I often have a bad reaction when people tell me I'm "too independent."
- I react strongly when someone tells me what (they think) I'm thinking or feeling, as though it were the truth.
 - Ask me about what I'm thinking or feeling, or take ownership of your guesses/stories as your own guesses/stories
- I don't do dynamics where I'm expected to pull information out of you. If I ask you if something's wrong and you say no, I'm going to take you at your word.
- I had a partner die on me unexpectedly, so I tend to want some things with folks I care about - a picture with them and a recording of their voice, or a video

- **Gender**

- I am non-binary. I am not a woman-lite. If you need me to be a woman, we should not date.
 - These days I have lots of mess and confusion about my gender. It has been changing a lot lately! So how I dress/present and how femme or masc I am might change a fair amount day to day.
 - Right now, when I submit, I tend to want to be called a girl or other feminine terms (e.g., princess) and have she/her pronouns used
 - I love my genitals and I wish I had a bio cock
 - I like my genitals called a cunt or pussy, and prefer different ones at different times. Do not call my vulva/vagina something cutesy (kitty, vajayjay) unless we've explicitly negotiated it.
 - If you want to use gendered words about me or my body, talk to me first. I need those to be explicitly negotiated (e.g., girlfriend, baby girl)
 - I have been on T in the past and may someday want to go back on T. If that would be weird for you, then I may not be a great fit for you.
 - If you identify as a straight cis man and you're dating me, you're either not that straight or you're not dating the real me.
- **Solo poly**
 - I identify as solo poly. This means that I want deep, meaningful, long-lasting relationships between two people who are equals and relatively autonomous.
 - I don't really want to be encoupled. I was us to be separate people who are in a relationship together.
 - I'm not sure how I feel about living with a partner in the future. If I did cohabitate with someone, we would have to have separate bedrooms at the least.
 - I am hesitant to entwine finances with anyone. If we have shared expenses, I want us to explicitly negotiate how we handle those.
 - I'm not sure whether I want to get legally married again. Maybe I will someday, but if marriage is really important to you, I may not be the best fit.
 - I don't want to have kids. I'm great as an aunt; I don't think I'd work well as a parent. If you have kids of whom you have partial custody, that might work for me, but it would likely need to be less than 50% of the time we spend together.
 - I don't generally date people who are new to non-monogamy. While in some ways I'm an easy polyam partner (communication skills, tools for conflict, etc), in other ways I'm a tough polyam partner (high expectations of my partners). I will occasionally date folks who are new to polyam, but I've been burned pretty much every time.
- **Kink**
 - I am a fairly kinky person. I tend to do best in romantic and sexual relationships where there is some element of kink
 - I'm a switch, and I trend top in general
 - I love lots of different kinds of kink and have tried lots of different activities.

- I am hesitant to be the partner with whom someone first explores kink because it can start to feel like education, which is my job.
 - This doesn't make it an absolute no, just that I tend to do best with folks who already have some knowledge and experience
- My hard limits are poop, lots of blood, permanent body modification, bruising/marks on the face and neck (neck can sometimes be okay, but we need to agree to it first)
- Don't assume a dynamic or assume I want to do any particular activity with you until we've negotiated.
- If you can't tell me what you want, we can't do it. If I can't tell you what I want, we shouldn't do it.
- I use red/yellow/green
 - Red = safe word, stop immediately and check in
 - Yellow = ease up a bit, can check in to see if I want you to change something
 - Green = good! Keep going!
- I have a non-verbal system for signaling red/yellow/green that I can show you in person
- I tend to think I'm not-so-kinky because I have friends who are very, very kinky and, in comparison, I feel only mildly kinky, but when I talk to people who are not at all kinky, it becomes clear that I am pretty kinky. *shrug*
- Right now, I'm really wanting a significant D/s dynamic where I'm the submissive partner. In particular, I would love a Dd/lg dynamic. I don't know that I want full 24/7 or TPE but I do want something fairly pervasive and significant.
 - At least right now, I love the idea of being collared in the future. That's a commitment that I take very, very seriously, so it would only come after 2+ years of relationship (at the very least)
- I don't tend to want any exclusivity of title or role. If it's important to you to have some exclusivity about titles/roles with me, then we would need to negotiate that.
 - Mostly, this is about not wanting any one partner to be exerting control over what happens in my connections with other people.
- **ADHD and relationship stuff**
 - I have moderate to severe ADHD, primarily hyperactive type. I didn't get my diagnosis until my mid-thirties, so I'm still just starting to understand how my brain works
 - Some stuff is really hard for me that isn't hard for neurotypical people.
 - Getting started on a task
 - Switching tasks
 - Sitting still
 - Focusing on something "boring," or tedious, or not rewarding
 - Remembering things that aren't visible/in front of me
 - Doing some kinds of tasks (opening the mail, putting away papers)

- I don't experience time the way that neurotypical folks do. I don't really have a good understanding of linear time.
 - My brain doesn't understand how long tasks take and often doesn't remember what all sub-tasks are involved in larger tasks, so it's hard for me to know how long things will take me.
 - For instance, leaving the house could involve packing a bag, figuring out food/beverages for while I'm out, walking my dog, deciding whether to take the dog or leave her at home, showering, figuring out what other tasks need to happen while I'm out, finding my keys, deciding on clothing, etc.
- I sometimes interrupt people or finish their thoughts if my brain thinks it can guess what the end of their thought will be. I also sometimes take an extra moment to process what was said to me, so I'll ask what the person said, but my brain will figure it out as soon as I've asked, so I'll then stop having them repeat themselves
 - I know this stuff can be frustrating and I'm working on it, and some amount of this may be part of the price of admission for dating me.
- I can have a lot of trouble with filtering stimuli. If we're in a noisy place, I might have trouble picking out your words. If we're at a restaurant with a TV, even if I don't care about what's on the screen, I may have trouble not watching it because it's flashing and bright and right there.
- I lose stuff sometimes. I'm better about this than I used to be, but far from good about it.
- My memory is really inconsistent. Sometimes I'll have a perfect, crystal-clear memory of a thing that happened years ago, other times I'll forget what happened yesterday.
 - This means I may ask you for the same stories and information multiple times. It's not that I wasn't listening or didn't care; it's that encoding in my brain doesn't always work properly, so I can't always access what happened.
- I'm often bad at being the first to message someone, but I tend to be pretty good at responding.
 - I don't tend to message first because there is always A LOT that I'm juggling, and anything that isn't about to explode or is right in my face can fall off my attention. I miss people! But if I don't message them at the exact moment I notice missing them, I'll realize it's been weeks that I've been noticing the missing, and then getting distracted before I message them
 - Sometimes I do get overwhelmed with messages and go into shutdown, struggling to read or respond to messages from anyone.
- I'll forget what I've told you and what I haven't
 - This might look like me telling you the same story 30 times

- This might look like me starting a conversation that seems like it's out of nowhere because I was having it with you in my brain first, and forgot that you weren't part of it inside my head
- I get REALLY excited about new people. They may not all work out. That's okay.
- I can be sensitive about some things. I try to take ownership of my feelings and to let you know what is my story and what is my observation, and not to assign any feelings/intentions to you that aren't yours
- I take a stimulant for my ADHD. This means I often forget to eat during the day. I love it when people help me remember to take care of myself when it comes to eating regularly
- Food can be a whole thing for me. So if I'm super hungry and you're making suggestions, I might shoot a bunch of them down. My internal experience when this is happening is that my stomach and body are SCREAMING about food, but when I consider an option, they still scream that the option isn't the right one. What tends to be most helpful is offering me a few concrete options (e.g., cook or order in; Chinese, Italian, or soul food) so that I can choose one rather than coming up with something. Even if I end up wanting none of those options, it can help me clarify what I do want.
- I think on the outside. I process most things best when I can talk them out. This may mean that it seems like I'm asking for your opinion on something because I want external input, when really what I need is to hear the options and thoughts out loud and feel them so that I can see which one is right for me.
 - If you aren't in a space where I can ask for your opinion and not go with it, please let me know so I can reframe what I'm asking you for
- I love to do new things. This means I've lived many, many lives. It also means I'm decently good at a lot of things and have a lot of diverse knowledge.
 - I promise I'm not trying to be annoying or a know-it-all, I just have the combination of intellect, ADHD, and curiosity that leads to a broad base of knowledge and skills
- I sometimes struggle when plans change. Plans changing can throw things off in a big way in my brain. This doesn't mean you can't change plans, it just means that I have a hard time with it
 - If you're someone who tends to want things to be super flexible and less firmly planned, please let me know so that I can understand how you're approaching the plans that we make.
- Sometimes I'll get overwhelmed and shut down for a bit. This can be me getting overwhelmed by stimuli in the environment, from my own emotions, from too many tasks, from being tired or hungry, etc
 - If it seems like I might be shutting down, please let me know.
 - Supportive actions when I'm overwhelmed are checking on when I last ate, drank water, slept, if I need touch, if I need space, when I last showered, encouraging me to take deep breaths, helping me laugh about something, being calm in how you interact with me

- If I shut down in the middle of a conflict, I am 100% committed to coming back to the conflict and solving it, I just need to get out of overwhelm first.
- I have a habit of over-scheduling and overcommitting myself (probably related to my brain not understanding how long things take). This means I sometimes move through cycles of being way overbooked to way underbooked.
 - I'm working on this one really hard and have been doing much better over the last couple of years
- The question "Why can't you just" is really really rough for me. Usually, the answer is that my brain doesn't work that way. So, if you're noticing a desire to ask why I can't just ____, I recommend finding other ways to ask about this
 - **Examples:** I notice you're really stressed about this deadline and hadn't started work on the project until recently. How can I support you in the future to avoid this kind of stress?
 - I get really worried when you don't eat for long periods, and I know that figuring out food can be really stressful for you. Is there anything I can do to support you around this?
 - Can you help me understand how we got to this place?
 - I've done x and y in the past in these situations. I'm sure you've considered them, but if you haven't, or if you want help brainstorming, I'm here.
 - I'm feeling really frustrated about how ____ is impacting me. Can you help me understand your actions here? How can we help this be better for both of us in the future?
- I know that I can seem like I have a ton of chaos. I'm also pretty successful and competent. I need someone who can find empathy, understanding, and curiosity about all my facets.
- My goal is not to be neurotypical or to be able to effectively pass as neurotypical. My goal is to understand myself and find ways to operate in this world that are true to me while not harming others.
- **Language**
 - I try to be very precise and intentional in the language I use about the relationships and people in my life
 - Whenever we transition to a new term for our relationship, I will likely want to talk about what that term means for each of us so that we're on the same page.
 - In general, here's how I understand some common relationship terms:
 - Dating - spending time together as part of exploring a possible romantic and/or sexual relationship
 - Lover - a person with whom I have a sexual and affectionate relationship that may or may not be romantic. Does not tend to be a relationship with many expectations/commitments aside from open communication

- Sweetie - someone with whom I'm in a romantic or romantically building relationship. Generally more serious, entwined, with more expectations and commitment than dating.
- Partner - someone with whom I am building a foundation for a long-lasting romantic/sexual relationship. Tends to be more serious/entwined than a sweetie, with more expectations and commitments. Tends to involve an expectation that someone is inviting me into their inner world, making time for me very regularly, and making me a priority in their life.
- Friend - someone with whom I do not have a romantic connection or romantic-relationship-type expectations/commitments. May also be a lover
- Anchor partner/foundational partner - a partner with whom I am building an interconnected, long-term life. Someone whom I consider strongly when making decisions. A person with significant entwinement and serious commitments/expectations.
- Nesting partner - someone with whom I share a living space
- Metamour - someone who is dating/a sweetie/a partner of one of my date mates/sweeties/partners
- Break up - the ending of a romantic/sexual connection with a person, at least for a time. Many of my breakups involve temporary breaks after which we reassess which parts of the former relationship we would like to try to keep or re-explore
- Relationship Transition/Re-structuring - shifting some portions of a relationship without necessarily having a break period. This may be a transition to greater or less entwinement, may involve changing the nature of a relationship as regards its romantic or sexual components, or a re-working of expectations and commitments

- **Metamour relationships**

- I prefer to have at least cordial relationships with my metamours, especially those of my closer partners.
- I don't mandate any particular kind of metamour relationships, and I'm not okay with any mandates on my metamour relationships.
- I tend to be uncomfortable with metamours who refuse to meet me ever, as my past experiences with these folks have been negative across the board, but I'm open-minded to being wrong about this if there's some kind of extraordinary circumstance
- I can't force any of my partners/people with whom I'm in relationships to build relationships with my other partners. However, I really, really appreciate it when they do put in the effort
 - In particular, AFAB folks tend to be more proactive about this and cis men tend to be the least active in it, and a lot of this is toxic masculinity and patriarchy and is bullshit

- I tend not to date people who refuse to ever meet their metamours or who aren't at least open to cordial relationships with their metas
- I tend to react strongly and negatively to metamours who exert/try to exert control over my relationship with our shared partner
- **Relationship management**
 - Relationship management refers to all of the tasks that keep a relationship going. This can include:
 - Scheduling dates
 - Sending messages
 - Paying attention to likes/dislikes
 - Offering love in the recipient's love languages
 - Asking about the other person
 - Supporting the other person when they are struggling
 - Identifying problems
 - Solving conflicts
 - Coming up with ideas for dates/plans
 - Paying for dates/plans
 - Making decisions
 - Cooking
 - Cleaning
 - STI risk management
 - Driving the conversation
 - I expect to share relationship management duties equitably with the people I'm in relationships with
 - Equitable isn't necessarily equal. For instance, if one person makes twice as much money as the other person, splitting a bill 50/50 would be equal, but not necessarily equitable
 - I realize that we all have relationship management tasks we're good at and ones we're bad at. I think things work best when we look at who's doing what and make sure we're balancing the tasks based on effort and skillfulness
 - Sometimes people who are cis men are unaccustomed to these tasks or do not notice that they're happening. That doesn't make it okay for them to not pull their own weight when it comes to relationship management, at least in relationships with me