Manuals for Real Life

A Teenager's Guide to Love, Relationships and Healthy Choices

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Introduction

At school, children learn many important things. Yet some of the questions that will shape their lives are rarely discussed: How do I choose the person I entrust with my heart? How do I protect my dignity? How do I manage my money? How do I turn my ideas into a project? How do I build a life that reflects who I am?

I began this series believing that teenagers can learn about relationships, money and their own choices earlier in life. They do not have to go through every painful experience to discover what could have helped them from the start.

Over the past 25 years, I have read hundreds of books about relationships, personal development, financial education and entrepreneurship. I began searching for this information because I had not received it myself when I needed it most.

Not every book gave me answers. Some repeated the same ideas; others changed the way I looked at life. From every valuable book, I kept what seemed truly useful to me.

Teenagers do not have the time, and sometimes not the patience, to read several hundred books to discover these ideas. That is why I created this series: to offer them the essentials in clear language, with examples they can relate to.

These manuals are not intended to replace the books that inspired them. On the contrary, each chapter is also an invitation. If an idea helps you, intrigues you or makes you recognise yourself, you will find a recommended book you can read in full to explore the subject further.

These manuals grew out of my personal experience, my own therapeutic journey and my study of the personal development and psychology books I have read throughout my life. I also used an artificial intelligence tool to organise ideas, create the covers, prepare some early drafts and revise the text. The choice of topics and ideas to share, the perspective, the examples, the critical assessment, the changes and the responsibility for the final version are mine.

A Letter to the Teenager Opening This Book

I wrote this book for the teenage girl I once was. For the girl who knew almost nothing about love but longed desperately to be loved. For the girl who did not know how to recognise manipulation, set boundaries or leave when a relationship was hurting her. For the girl who sometimes confused love with the need to be chosen, and who believed she had to earn other people's affection.

During my childhood and adolescence, I did not receive the information I needed to build healthy relationships. So I entered my romantic life without a compass. I made many of the mistakes you will read about in this book. I accepted things I should not have accepted. I stayed when leaving would have been healthier. I tried to find in other people the love I did not yet know how to give myself.

I suffered a great deal, but I searched for answers. I read everything I could find about love, attachment, communication, manipulation, emotional wounds, emotional dependency and healing. I wanted to understand not only what had happened to me, but why.

Today, I know I cannot change the choices I made then, with the information I had. But I can pass on what I have learned.

That is why I wrote this book for my son and his future wife, for their classmates and friends, for the girls and boys they will one day love, and for the people with whom they will build their lives.

I do not want to tell you whom to love or protect you from every kind of suffering — no one can do that. I want to offer you a compass. To help you recognise respect, and its absence. To understand the difference between love and dependency, between interest and control, between a natural disagreement and a relationship that gradually destroys your confidence in yourself.

I am writing these pages so that you can recognise sooner what took me years to recognise. If every conversation leaves you doubting yourself, apologising for your needs or accepting things just to end the tension, do not ignore what you feel. Talk to someone you trust. Do not wait for perfect proof before protecting your dignity.

I wrote it for you too, dear reader, whatever your age. Some questions about love stay with us long after adolescence. If you have carried them too, without finding answers, I hope these pages will help you.

Part One — Before There Is an Us, There Is a Me

A relationship does not begin on the day of the first date. It begins with how you see yourself, the things you accept and the voice you give your needs.

Who Am I When I Am Not Trying to Be Liked?

At the beginning of a relationship, we want to show the best version of ourselves.

We choose carefully what we say, how we dress and which photos we send. We try to be funny, interesting and relaxed. We hide our insecurities and avoid talking about anything we think might put the other person off.

So far, there is nothing unusual about that. Wanting to make a good impression is natural.

The problem begins when we stop presenting ourselves in the best light and start constructing a person we think could be loved.

The mask we wear to be chosen

Perhaps the person you like loves sport, and you pretend to like it too, even though it bores you. Perhaps they say they appreciate people who are not jealous, and you hide everything that worries you so you can seem completely unbothered.

Perhaps you change the way you dress. You laugh at jokes you do not find funny. You say something does not bother you when it actually hurts you. You give up activities you enjoy or talk to your friends less often so you can always be available.

Gradually, you stop asking yourself:

"Do I really like this person?"

You only ask:

"What do I have to do to make them like me?"

There is an enormous difference.

In the first question, both of you matter. In the second, your entire worth seems to depend on the other person's choice.

In the work of Marius Simion and Horia Radu (NLP Revolution, 2021), I came across an idea that made me think about how we present ourselves in a relationship:

We want to be loved as we are, but we present ourselves wearing masks

This is one of the great contradictions of relationships.

We want someone to truly see us and love us for who we are. But, afraid we will not be enough, we show them a carefully constructed version of ourselves that we think is more likely to be accepted.

Then, if that person grows close to us, a painful question arises:

Do they love me, or do they love the character I have shown them?

Even when we receive the love we wanted, we may not be able to enjoy it. Deep down, we know we have not been entirely honest. We fear that if the mask slips, the other person will leave.

So, instead of finding peace in the relationship, we end up living in a constant state of tension.

How much energy do you spend being someone else?

A mask takes work to maintain.

You have to remember what you pretended to like. Hide your real reactions. Accept things that do not suit you. Always appear a certain way, even when you are tired, sad or insecure.

At first, it may seem like a small effort. You say:

"It does not matter. I can adapt."

But over time, adapting can turn into losing your own identity.

You stop saying what you think because you are afraid of starting an argument. You stop saying no because you do not want to disappoint anyone. You no longer choose what you like, but what you think will keep the other person interested.

And one day, you may find yourself wondering:

What did I actually want?

A relationship in which you constantly have to play a role can become a job with no breaks. Except you do not get paid. You are the one paying — with your energy, freedom and peace of mind.

When two people do not want the same thing

Suppose the person you like wants a partner who enjoys parties, frequent nights out and large groups. You prefer quiet evenings, conversations between the two of you and spending time with a few close friends.

You could pretend to enjoy their lifestyle. You could go to every party and smile in the photos while longing to get home. Perhaps you would succeed in winning their interest.

But what would you actually have gained?

You would have convinced someone who wants something different that you are what they are looking for. To keep the relationship, you would have to go on playing that character. And if you began to be yourself one day, the other person would feel that you had changed.

Sometimes two people like each other but are not right for each other. That does not make either of them less valuable.

A beautiful shoe that is not your size is not a bad shoe. It simply does not fit you. If you wear it just because you like it so much, it will hurt you with every step.

Being authentic does not mean sharing everything straight away

Being authentic does not mean telling someone your entire life story on the first date. Trust develops gradually, and intimacy needs time.

Nor does it mean expressing every thought without caring about its effect on the other person:

“I always say exactly what I think. If they get upset, that is their problem.”

Honesty without care can become cruelty.

Authenticity means that what you choose to show is true. You can keep some things for later, but it is not healthy to invent an identity, pretend to have different values or accept things that violate your boundaries.

You can say:

“I do not feel ready to talk about that yet.”

That is honesty.

Making up a story just to seem more interesting is something else.

“That is just how I am” is not an excuse

There is also the other extreme. Sometimes people use authenticity to avoid making any changes:

“That is just how I am. If you like it, fine. If not, leave.”

But the fact that a behaviour is part of your life does not make it good or mean that it cannot change.

Perhaps you have learned to raise your voice when someone disagrees with you. Perhaps you shut down completely and punish the other person with silence. Perhaps you are always late, make promises you do not keep or tell jokes that hurt others.

These are not necessarily parts of your identity. They are behaviours. And behaviours can be noticed, understood and changed.

Identity says:

“Freedom matters to me.”

Unhealthy behaviour says:

“Because I love freedom, I can disappear without explanation and return whenever I want.”

Identity says:

“I am a direct person.”

Unhealthy behaviour says:

“I can insult you because I tell the truth.”

Identity says:

“I need time on my own.”

Mature communication says:

“I am overwhelmed and need a little time to calm down. I am not ignoring you. I will come back, and we can talk then.”

Authenticity does not mean refusing to grow. It means growing without becoming a copy of the person someone else wants you to be.

What do we change, and what do we keep?

In a healthy relationship, both of us adapt. We learn to communicate better, take each other’s needs into account and change behaviours that cause hurt.

But healthy adaptation should not require us to give up our values, principles and identity.

We can change:

- the way we speak when we are angry;
- the habit of interrupting;
- the tendency to avoid difficult conversations;
- our lack of punctuality;
- the way we express our needs;
- the behaviours through which we hurt others.

We should not be forced to give up:

- our values and principles;
- our right to have boundaries;
- healthy friendships and family ties;
- important dreams and projects;
- our personality;
- our right to say “no”;
- the essential things that define us.

Sometimes the line between the two is not obvious. That is why it is worth asking ourselves:

Am I making this change because it helps me become a better person, or because I am afraid I will be abandoned if I stay true to myself?

The best version of you is still you

Becoming the best version of yourself does not mean becoming perfect. Nor does it mean turning into everyone’s favourite person.

It means remaining yourself while learning to be more honest, responsible, courageous and mindful of your effect on those around you.

A tree can grow, become stronger and put out new branches without turning into a different tree.

So can you.

You can learn. You can make changes. You can let go of reactions that hurt you. You can discover new things about yourself. But you do not have to abandon your roots just to make someone choose to stay with you.

What if they do not like the real me?

This is the question that frightens us most.

What if I am honest and they do not like me?

Then you have received painful but valuable information: you are not right for each other.

Rejection hurts. But it is healthier to be rejected for who you are than accepted for who you are not. In the first case, you lose the possibility of an unsuitable relationship. In the second, you risk losing yourself.

The aim is not to be liked by everyone. No one is.

The aim is to be truly known by the people you are right for, and to give them the freedom to be who they are too.

Authenticity does not guarantee that every person you want will choose you. But it gives you the chance to know that when someone does choose you, their choice is truly you.

The masks we wear online

On social media, it is very easy to construct an ideal version of our lives.

We choose the best photo out of twenty. We show the trip, but not the argument. We post the achievement, but not the fear that came before it. We can appear constantly happy, sociable and confident.

There is nothing wrong with choosing what we make public. We all have a right to privacy. The problem arises when we begin to believe we must always live up to our own online image.

Other people do the same thing.

So do not compare your whole life, with its good and bad days, to a selection of someone else's best moments. And do not try to build a relationship solely with the image someone displays online.

Get to know the person beyond the profile.

An exercise in honesty

Complete the following sentences without thinking about which answer would impress someone:

- When I am not trying to be liked by anyone, I am…
- The things I truly enjoy are…
- The values I do not want to give up are…
- Sometimes I pretend to like…
- I am afraid people would not accept me if they knew…
- In relationships, I tend to hide…
- One behaviour I want to change is…
- An important part of myself I want to keep is…
- Around people I feel safe with, I can…
- I would like to be loved for…

Then look at your answers and ask yourself:

Can I be this person in my relationships, or do I feel I constantly have to play a role?