

# Building a Healthy Relationship from the Start

## The Beginning Stages

While the early months of a relationship can feel effortless and exciting, successful long-term relationships involve ongoing effort and compromise by both partners. Building healthy patterns early in your relationship can establish a solid foundation for the long run. When you are just starting a relationship, it is important to:

**Build.** Build a foundation of appreciation and respect. Focus on all the considerate things your partner says and does. Happy couples make a point of noticing even small opportunities to say "thank you" to their partner, rather than focusing on mistakes their partner has made.

**Explore.** Explore each other's interests so that you have a long list of things to enjoy together. Try new things together to expand mutual interests.

**Establish.** Establish a pattern of apologizing if you make a mistake or hurt your partner's feelings. Saying "I'm sorry" may be hard in the moment, but it goes a long way towards healing a rift in a relationship. Your partner will trust you more if he or she knows that you will take responsibility for your words and actions.

## As the Months Go By: Important Things to Recognize as Your Relationship Grows

### Relationships Change.

Changes in life outside your relationship will impact what you want and need from the relationship. Since change is inevitable, welcoming it as an opportunity to enhance the relationship is more fruitful than trying to keep it from happening.

### Check in Periodically.

Occasionally set aside time to check in with each other on changing expectations and goals. If a couple ignores difficult topics for too long, their relationship is likely to drift into rocky waters without their noticing.

## What to Do When Conflict Arises

Disagreements in a relationship are not only normal but, if constructively resolved, actually strengthen the relationship. It is inevitable that there will be times of sadness, tension, or outright anger between you and your partner. The source of these problems may lie in unrealistic/unreasonable demands, unexplored expectations, or unresolved issues/behaviors in one partner or in the relationship. Resolving conflicts requires honesty, a willingness to consider your partner's perspective even if you don't fully understand it, and lots of communication.

Healthy communication is critical, especially when there are important decisions regarding sex, career, marriage, and family to be made. The following are some guidelines for successful

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communication and conflict resolution.

### **Understand Each Others' Family Patterns.**

Find out how conflicts were managed (or not managed) in your partner's family, and talk about how conflict was approached (or avoided) in your own family. It is not unusual for couples to discover that their families had different ways of expressing anger and resolving differences. If your family wasn't good at communicating or resolving conflict constructively, give yourself permission to try out some new ways of handling conflict.

### **Timing Counts.**

Contrary to previous notions, the best time to resolve a conflict may not be immediately. It is not unusual for one or both partners to need some time to cool off. This "time-out" period can help you avoid saying or doing hurtful things in the heat of the moment, and can help partners more clearly identify what changes are most important. Remember - if you are angry with your partner but don't know what you want yet, it will be nearly impossible for your partner to figure it out!

### **Establish an Atmosphere of Emotional Support.**

Emotional support involves accepting your partner's differences and not insisting that he or she meet your needs only in the precise way that you want them met. Find out how your partner shows his or her love for you, and don't set absolute criteria that require your partner to always behave differently before you're satisfied.

### **Agree to Disagree and Move On.**

Most couples will encounter some issues upon which they will never completely agree. Rather than continuing a cycle of repeated fights, agree to disagree and negotiate a compromise or find a way to work around the issue.

### **Distinguish between things you *want* versus things you *need* from your partner.**

For example, for safety reasons, you might need your partner to remember to pick you up on time after dark. But calling you several times a day may really only be a "want."

### **Clarify Your Messages.**

A clear message involves a respectful but direct expression of your wants and needs. Take some time to identify what you really want before talking to your partner. Work on being able to describe your request in clear, observable terms. For example, you might say, "I would like you to hold my hand more often" rather than the vague, "I wish you were more affectionate."

### **Discuss One Thing at a Time.**

It can be tempting to list your concerns or grievances, but doing so will likely prolong an argument. Do your best to keep the focus on resolving one concern at a time.

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### **Really Listen.**

Being a good listener requires the following: (a) don't interrupt, (b) focus on what your partner is saying rather than on formulating your own response, and (c) check out what you heard your partner say. You might start this process with: "I think you are saying..." Or "what I understood you to say was..." This step alone can prevent misunderstandings that might otherwise develop into a fight.

### **Restrain Yourself.**

Research has found that couples who "edit" themselves and do not say all the angry things they may be thinking are typically the happiest.

### **Adopt a "Win-Win" Position.**

A "win-win" stance means that your goal is for the relationship, rather than for either partner, to "win" in a conflict situation. Ask yourself: "Is what I am about to say (or do) going to increase or decrease the odds that we'll work this problem out?"

## **Healthy and Problematic Expectations in Relationships**

Each of us enters into romantic relationships with ideas about what we want based on family relationships, what we've seen in the media, and our own past relationship experiences. Holding on to unrealistic expectations can cause a relationship to be unsatisfying and to eventually fail. The following will help you to distinguish between healthy and problematic relationship expectations:

### **Respect Changes.**

What you want from a relationship in the early months of dating may be quite different from what you want after you have been together for some time. Anticipate that both you and your partner will change over time. Feelings of love and passion change with time, as well. Respecting and valuing these changes is healthy. Love literally changes brain chemistry for the first months of a relationship. For both physiological and emotional reasons, an established relationship will have a more complex and often richer type of passion than a new relationship.

### **Accept Differences.**

It is difficult, but healthy, to accept that there are some things about our partners that will not change over time, no matter how much we want them to. Unfortunately, there is often an expectation that our partner will change only in the ways we want. We may also hold the unrealistic expectation that our partner will never change from the way he or she is now.

### **Express Wants and Needs.**

While it is easy to assume that your partner knows your wants and needs, this is often not the case and can be the source of much stress in relationships. A healthier approach is to directly express our needs and wishes to our partner.

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### **Respect Your Partner's Rights.**

In healthy relationships, there is respect for each partner's right to have her/his own feelings, friends, activities, and opinions. It is unrealistic to expect or demand that that he or she have the same priorities, goals, and interests as you.

### **Be Prepared to "Fight Fair."**

Couples who view conflict as a threat to the relationship, and something to be avoided at all costs, often find that accumulated and unaddressed conflicts are the real threat. Healthy couples fight, but they "fight fair" - accepting responsibility for their part in a problem, admitting when they are wrong, and seeking compromise.

### **Maintain the Relationship.**

Most of us know that keeping a vehicle moving in the desired direction requires not only regular refueling, but also ongoing maintenance and active corrections to the steering to compensate for changes in the road. A similar situation applies to continuing relationships. While we may work hard to get the relationship started, expecting to cruise without effort or active maintenance typically leads the relationship to stall or crash! Though gifts and getaways are important, it is often the small, nonmaterial things that partners routinely do for each other that keep the relationship satisfying.

## **Outside Pressures on the Relationship**

### **Differences in Background.**

Even partners coming from very similar cultural, religious, or economic backgrounds can benefit from discussing their expectations of how a good boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse behaves. What seems obvious or normal to you may surprise your partner, and vice versa. If you are from different backgrounds, be aware that you may need to spend more time and energy to build your relationship. Take the time to learn about your partner's culture or religion, being careful to check out what parts of such information actually fit for your partner.

### **Time Together and Apart.**

How much time you spend together and apart is a common relationship concern. If you interpret your partner's time apart from you as, "he or she doesn't care for me as much as I care for him or her," you may be headed for trouble by jumping to conclusions. Check out with your partner what time alone means to him or her, and share your feelings about what you need from the relationship in terms of time together. Demanding what you want, regardless of your partner's needs, usually ends up driving your partner away, so work on reaching a compromise.

### **Your Partner's Family.**

For many students, families remain an important source of emotional, if not financial, support during their years at the university. Some people find dealing with their partner's family difficult or frustrating. It can help to take a step back and think about parental good intentions.

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Families may offer well-intentioned advice about your relationship or your partner. It's important that the two of you discuss and agree on how you want to respond to differing family values and support one another in the face of what can be very intense "suggestions" from family.

### **Friends.**

There are some people who seem to believe that "I have to give up all my friends unless my partner likes them as much as I do." Giving up friends is not healthy for you or the relationship, except in circumstances where your friends pressure you to participate in activities that are damaging to yourself and the relationship. At the same time, keep in mind that your partner may not enjoy your friends as much as you do. Negotiate which friends you and your partner spend time with together. You might ask: "Which of my friends do you enjoy seeing and which ones would you rather I see alone or at other times when I'm not with you?"

## **Eight Basic Steps to Maintaining a Good Relationship**

1. Be aware of what you and your partner want for yourselves and what you want from the relationship.
2. Let one another know what your needs are.
3. Realize that your partner will not be able to meet all your needs. Some of these needs will have to be met outside of the relationship.
4. Be willing to negotiate and compromise on the things you want from one another.
5. Do not demand that a partner change to meet all your expectations. Work to accept the differences between your ideal mate and the real person you are dating.
6. Try to see things from the other's point of view. This doesn't mean that you must agree with one another all the time, but rather that both of you can understand and respect each other's differences, points of view, and separate needs.
7. Where critical differences do exist in your expectations, needs, or opinions, try to work honestly and sincerely to negotiate. Seek professional help early rather than waiting until the situation becomes critical.
8. Do your best to treat your partner in a way that says, "I love you and trust you, and I want to work this out."

*Please note: The information above is not intended as a substitute for contact with a mental health professional. It is provided as a means for visitors to this web page to obtain additional information on topics typically discussed in counseling. Inevitably, some of the information represents opinion. If you read information that raises concerns or questions, we invite you to come in to the Counselling & Career Centre in room 1402.*

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