

Healthy Relationships

Being a college student and maintaining a healthy romantic relationship can be a difficult task. While you may receive a great deal of support, comfort, and satisfaction from your relationship, you may also feel confused and frustrated by the additional responsibilities and demands on your time. How you negotiate and balance the many roles you play will greatly influence the quality of your life together and the quality of your student experience.

Qualities of a Healthy Relationship

- **Communication:** Partners need to feel free to express both positive and negative feelings, needs, complaints, and affection. Check out misunderstandings and let your partner know how you are affected by his/her statements. A lot of misunderstandings and subsequent hurt feelings in relationships come from the belief that you or your partner should know what each other is thinking, feeling, or needs (e.g., "If he really loved me, he would know that I need _____"), without having to explicitly communicate this information (e.g., "I would really like to spend time with you alone tonight"). Do not assume that your partner can read your mind, or alternatively, that you should be able to guess or know your partner's needs, thoughts, or feelings. While the best way to get your needs met is to talk with your partner about them, in healthy relationships, there is also room to say "no" to each other's requests.
- **Expectations:** In all romantic relationships, there is a need to integrate your life as a couple and your individual lives, needs, and expectations. Common negotiations that arise in relationships include the following:
 - Time spent together versus apart.
 - Time spent with each other's friends and family-separately or as a couple.
 - Each person's needs, interests, desires, and preferences (e.g., how to spend the evening together-such as, whether you go out with a group of people or just the two of you; what movie to see; how to come together after a long day at work or school-such as, does one partner initially need some "alone time" before coming together?)
 - Financial arrangements-deciding who will pay for what.
 - Expectations for attention, emotional support, and affection.

Remember to communicate your expectations as clearly and directly as possible.

- **Conflict:** There will be times when communication breaks down. This often happens when partners maintain different perspectives, disagree about expectations, or experience divergent needs. In love relationships, conflict is normal, inevitable, and can even be healthy. Successful fights can clear up problems and lead each partner to understand the other better, thereby increasing intimacy and enhancing and strengthening the relationship.

In a connected and caring relationship, each partner should be able to state his or her mind without fear of dire consequences. To make a safe place for conflict, use the principles of "fair fighting," which include the following ideas:

- Negotiate a time to talk about difficult topics (e.g., when neither person is distracted, tired, or very angry). Call a "time-out" if necessary, and return to the discussion at a better time.
- Use "I" statements (e.g., "I feel upset when you yell at me in front of other people"), versus "you" statements (e.g., "You came across as rude and controlling" or "Your approach is wrong").
- Use respectful language and behavior.
- Listen to each other without interruption, reflect back what was said, and check in with the other to make sure you understood what was said.
- Clarify differences, identify the problem, and suggest solutions that may be mutually acceptable or offer some compromise.
- Stay in the present and focus on one problem at a time.
- Agree upon a solution, agree to disagree, or agree to continue the discussion at another time. Consider using the help of a 3rd party, if necessary.
- Acknowledge each person's positive contribution to the process (e.g., "Thank you for listening to my feelings, I felt you really understood how I was feeling," or "I'm glad you could tell me how you were feeling.")
- Admit when you are wrong.
- **Boundaries:** Aside from establishing boundaries with each other in the relationship (e.g., for personal space, time alone, sexual likes and dislikes), there is a need in love relationships to set boundaries between you as a couple and the demands of the outside world. Adopt a lifestyle that allows you to take care of your work and relationships. Continue to reevaluate priorities, and when needed, set limits to avoid feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Make it a priority to set aside "quality time" for the two of you to spend together.

How to Tell if You're in an Unhealthy or Abusive Relationship

Abusive relationships occur across racial and socio-economic lines. The "abuser" may be either male or female. Abuse can occur in both heterosexual and same-sex relationships.

Common characteristics of abusive relationships include: emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse; aggression; intimidation and control; economic domination; and minimizing, denying, and blaming. The following checklist gives some examples of specific behaviors common in abusive relationships.

Does your partner:

- Act jealous of your friends, family, past partners, or others in your life?
- Not see you as an equal (e.g., because he or she is older, or sees him or herself a superior socially or more intelligent)?
- Prevent you from getting or keeping a job, having access to money, or participating in making financial decisions?
- Drink or use drugs excessively?
- Ridicule, embarrass, or humiliate you with bad names, put-downs, or belittling comments?
- Berate you for not wanting to have sex?
- Easily lose his or her temper?
- Make all the decisions, "take over" things you want to handle on your own, or sulk or become angry when you initiate an action or idea?
- Try to get you drunk or high, or berate you for not wanting to get drunk or high?
- Lead you to like yourself less or feel bad about yourself after you have been with him or her?
- Engage in sex with you in a way that feels degrading or humiliating?
- Throw or break things or destroy your property when angry?
- Think that in a relationship there are times when violence is okay?
- Invade your "personal space" (e.g., sits too close, touches you when asked not to, speaks like he or she knows you much better than he or she does)?
- Threaten to commit suicide if you leave?
- Try to run or control your life, such as what you do, where you go, whom you see or talk to, whom you are friends with, or how you should look or dress?
- Use looks, actions, or gestures that make you scared?
- Seem like "Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde," that is, kind one minute and cruel the next?
- Force you to participate in sex or a sexual act against your will?
- Get angry if you are not always giving him or her your attention?
- Threaten to hurt or kill your pets or other people?
- Use guns, knives, or other weapons to intimidate you?
- Act angry and threatening to the point that you have changed your life to avoid angering him or her?
- Acknowledge hitting previous partners?

- Keep you confined or prevent you from leaving?
- Use weapons or objects or otherwise act aggressively during sex in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable?
- Ignore you or withhold love and affection in order to get his or her way?
- Talk negatively about your gender (e.g., "All women are stupid.")
- Push, shove, slap, kick, bite, choke, pull your hair, throw you across the room or down on the floor or hit you?
- Play mind games with you or make you think you are crazy?
- Think that you are "cheating" if you talk to or dance with someone else?
- Threaten to harm or kill you?
- Blame you for his or her abusive behavior, act like it is no big deal, or deny it happened?
- Force you into dropping, or never filing, criminal charges against him or her?

If you recognized any of the characteristics described above in your relationship, you may be in an abusive relationship. It may be important to take some steps to begin the healing process and to plan for your safety. To begin this process, seek the support of a professional (e.g., counselor, support group), call a hotline, or talk to trusted friends or adults.

If you are an abuser, there are people who understand and can help you, if you want it. Tell trusted friends or adults about your problem, call a hotline, or find a counselor or support group.

When to Seek Additional Help:

Therapy is advisable when:

- You think you are in an abusive relationship or an abuser.
- You are unhappy in a relationship. Aside from abuse, there are many other reasons why a relationship may be unhealthy, or an unhappy one (e.g., Your partner is: unfaithful, abusing drugs or alcohol, depressed, unable to be emotionally supportive, not wanting the level of commitment that you want, etc.). Also, at times you may discover that you are both wanting very different things out of life or from your relationship, or that your personal goals may be incompatible or incongruous with each other's needs.
- You are unsure of whether or not you should end a relationship, or when you decide you should end a relationship but are unable to do so.

- You recognize you have a pattern of staying in bad relationships but you have been unable to change that pattern by yourself.

In addition, even in healthy relationships, intimacy may stir up anxieties and concerns rooted in earlier or previous significant relationships (e.g., fears related to experiences with family members or previous partners, "leftover issues" from childhood). Therapy can help to sort out and understand how anxieties in past relationships get re-experienced and played out in current relationships.

Also, couples may see a therapist together to improve their communication and understanding of each other, and assist in conflict resolution, when the couple's previous attempts have not been successful.

At the Counseling Center, you can have the opportunity to talk with a counselor about your particular relationship difficulties. A consultation with a therapist may help determine whether your relationship difficulties are best addressed individually or in couples therapy*, and/or provide referrals to other resources.

*Couples can be seen at the Counseling Center if both partners are full-time undergraduate students at St. Mary's. Otherwise, a referral can be provided to a couples therapist in the community.

Resources

Books:

Halter, L.L. (1988). *Traits of a Happy Couple*. Texas, World Books Publisher.

Rue, N.N. (1989). *Coping with Dating Violence*. New York, Rosen Publishing Group.

Web sites with more information:

<http://counseling.uchicago.edu/vpc/virtulets.html>

University of Chicago Student Counseling Virtual Pamphlet Collection on Relationships.

- Offers links to relationship information such as: communication with roommates, conflict resolution, how to survive a relationship breakup, and violence in relationships.

Other resources:

Stand Against Domestic Violence 1-888-215-5555

- Offers 24-hour crisis line, counseling for people who have been abused, counseling for perpetrators of abuse, and other services.
- or a full description of their services and links to related resources:
<http://www.standagainstdv.org>