



## The Counselling and Personal Development Service.

### Intimate Relationships

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### A guide to common issues and concerns in intimate relationships

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#### Introduction

#### How healthy is your relationship?

#### A Self-Assessment

Many students enter into a romantic relationship during college. The beginning of the relationship is often exhilarating and easy. **As time goes on, a healthy relationship requires good communication, love, respect and cooperation between partners.** The quality of our relationships affects our lives in many ways, including our self-esteem, our ability to handle stress, and our academic and work-related productivity. The following questionnaire can help you identify the health of the relationship that you have with your significant other. Answer each question with a simple "yes" or "no."

- My partner and I have clear communication
- We have trust in one another
- There is mutual respect between us
- We have common interests
- We are able to perceive things differently without expecting each other to see things the others' way
- I feel valued intellectually, emotionally, and if intimate, physically
- I am able to grow independently, and I support my partner's growth, thus our relationship is also able to grow
- We have activities and friends outside of the relationship
- We accept each other and do not try to change one another
- Our relationship adds joy to my life

If you answered "no" to any of the above questions you may want to explore the health of your relationship.



## **Common questions about relationships, and some answers**

**I've never been very good at relationships, of any kind. I don't even know how or where to begin.**

Relationships begin with you, because you are half of any relationship you join. So start with yourself! Don't count on a relationship to "cure" a poor self-image. It won't work. But here are some measures that can:

- Make an inventory of your best, most attractive qualities and affirm them to yourself often.
- Avoid unrealistic standards and all-or-nothing thinking: "If I don't make an A on every test, I'm a total failure."
- Challenge yourself to accept and absorb compliments: simple "thank you" raises self-esteem; negations, such as, "*You like this outfit? I think it makes me look dumpy,*" lower self-esteem.
- Remember that there are no guarantees. Making gains requires taking risks. Seek out new experiences and people; then approach them with openness and curiosity. Each is an opportunity.
- Don't expect overnight success. Close friendships and intimate love relationships both take time to develop.

**I don't think I have poor self-esteem. I feel pretty good about myself. But this is a big university, and it's easy to get lost in the crowd. How do I go about meeting 'someone special'?**

Your question implies that you see meeting people as something which requires effort, and you're right! No matter how stunningly attractive you may be, passively waiting for others to throw themselves your way not only doesn't work very reliably, it doesn't allow you to be very choosy. Here are some common-sense approaches which you may find helpful:

- The best way to meet people is to put yourself in places where there are likely to be other people who share your interests and values: classes, ticket lines at sporting or cultural events, join an organization! Check with the Students' Union for information on groups based on athletics, academics, political/special interests, ethnicity/culture, service or charity.
- Once you're with people, initiate a conversation by: asking a question, commenting on the situation, asking for or offering an opinion, expressing some interest, showing some concern, or offering or requesting help.

- Once you've engaged someone in conversation, let them know you're listening and interested. Make eye contact, adopt an open posture, reflect the feelings you hear, paraphrase what they are saying, and ask for clarification if you don't understand.
- And, again, remember: no risks, no gains. Don't be discouraged if you and the other person don't "click" first and every time.

**One thing that's difficult for me in relationships is "hanging on to myself." It seems that once I get close to someone -- roommate, friend, or lover -- I give in and accommodate so much that there's nothing left of me.**

It's hard to experience fulfillment in a relationship which is not equal and reciprocal. The best way to avoid "giving yourself up" in a relationship is to develop some assertiveness skills to express your feelings, beliefs, opinions, and needs openly and honestly. Here are some guidelines:

- When stating your feelings, use "I-statements". Avoid accusatory or blaming "you-statements." They usually only result in defensiveness and counterattacks.
- You have a right to have feelings and to make requests. State them directly and firmly and without apology.
- Acknowledge the other person's point of view, but repeat your request as many times as necessary.
- Learn to say "no" to unreasonable requests. Offer a reason -- not an excuse -- if you choose, but your feelings are reason enough. Trust them.

**Won't I lose my friends and lover if I always insist on getting my own way?**

Assertiveness is not about always getting your way. Nor is it about coercing or manipulating. Those are acts of aggression. An assertion does not violate another's rights, and it does not preclude compromise. But a compromise, by definition, meets the needs of both people as much as possible. If your friend or lover is unwilling to compromise or has no respect for your feelings, maybe there's not so much to lose.

**My romantic partner and I seem to be coming from different worlds sometimes. It's pretty frustrating. What can we do about it?**

It's normal for relationship partners to have different needs in at least a few areas, such as: spending time with others vs. spending time with each other, wanting "quality time" together vs. needing time to be alone, going out dancing vs. going to a ballgame, etc. Differing needs don't mean your relationship is coming apart, but it is important to communicate about them to avoid misunderstandings.

- Tell your partner directly what you want or need ("I would really like to spend time alone with you tonight"), rather than expecting them to know already ("If you really cared for me, you would know what I want").
- Set aside time to discuss unresolved issues: "I'm feeling uncomfortable about...and would like to talk about it. What time is agreeable to you?" Pouting, sulking, and the "silent treatment" don't make matters any better.

- Inevitably you and your partner will have conflicts, but they needn't be nasty. Here are some tips for 'Fair Fighting'.
  - Use assertive language (see above for a reminder).
  - Avoid name calling, or intentionally calling attention to known weaknesses or sensitive issues ("hitting below the belt").
  - Stay in the present, don't dwell on past grievances.
  - Listen actively - express back to your partner what you understand his/her thoughts and feelings to be.
  - Admit when you're wrong.



**A lot of your answers seem to assume we're talking about heterosexual relationships. What about LGBTI+ relationships? Do the same principles apply?**

All humans have the same needs for love, safety, and commitment. Whatever a person's gender identity or sexuality we all share the same basic relationship needs. But there are some differences:

- Partners in LGBTI+ relationships must deal with the stress of those members of society who fear or condemn their sexuality or sexual orientation. Feeling unable to be open about one's relationship with friends, colleagues, and family can leave the LGBTI+ couple isolated and deprived of a support network.
- Prejudice against LGBTI+ people can also affect the couple's self-esteem, making the normal ups and downs of a relationship all the more difficult.
- Heterosexist or Cisgender prejudice can affect non-romantic relationships. For instance, two female friends, two brothers, or even fathers and sons, may feel reluctant to express their affection and caring for each other for fear of being judged.

## **SEXUAL COMMUNICATION and CONSENT**

### ***Sexual Communication***

When it comes to sexual communication, there can be a lot of double meanings, confusion, and missed communication. When this happens around sexual issues, it can mean trouble - like acquaintance rape.

A number of factors can automatically influence how we communicate around our sexual needs and wishes. Power differences, Gender Roles, Cultural and Religious norms can enable or inhibit how and if we express ourselves and so are important for both parties to be

aware of. For this reason, the principle of Sexual Consent is increasingly emphasised to guide us in being true to ourselves.

Sexual Consent. A useful definition for all Relationships, Genders and Sexual Orientations is that Sexual Consent needs to be OMFG i.e. Ongoing, Mutual & Freely Given.

*For Legal Definition see: eISB, Irish Statute Book @ Government of Ireland, Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017*

You do not surrender your human right to refuse to engage in a sexual act because you are involved in a sexual relationship, including marriage, with that person.

It is very important to communicate what you really want. You have the right to set sexual limits and to communicate them.

If you don't like what someone is saying or doing to you, tell them how you feel. Be very clear and assertive. If you mean no, say "NO!"

If you want to do something sexual, or change to a different sexual act, make sure your partner clearly consents before doing so (by **clear** action or words). Passive behaviour is not consent.

Ask yourself, "Can I say no clearly?" before entering into a potentially-dangerous situation. Also, does this feel safe?

**Even when we're communicating well in other areas, my partner and I often get bogged down when it comes to talking about sex. I often feel we have very different expectations in this area.**

First of all, it is important to be aware of your own feelings: how you feel about your partner, how comfortable you feel in his or her presence, what does and doesn't feel comfortable or desirable in terms of physical closeness or sexual contact. Trust your gut feelings.

- Communicate what YOU really want sexually. Express what you enjoy and also what you are not comfortable with.
- Listen carefully to what your partner wants and does not want.
- Find the kind of sexual contact you both are happy with.
- When exploring new territory sexually, pay particular attention to make sure both of you are clearly happy or stop
- Communicate clearly to your partner/date what your limits are. Be prepared to defend your limits. If you mean No, then say "No," and don't give mixed messages. You have the right to be respected and you are NOT responsible for your partner/date's feelings or reactions.
- Both partners have a responsibility in preventing unwanted sexual contact. Either party must recognize that no means no, regardless of when the other person says it,

and regardless of whether you think they are saying "yes" nonverbally. If a person says "no" and is still coerced or forced into having sex, then a rape has occurred.

- If you feel unsafe, leave the situation immediately - fifty to seventy percent of rapes are perpetrated by an acquaintance of the victim.

## **ABUSE**

### **Relationship Violence Warning Signs**

#### **Pay attention to cues when you are getting to know someone**

- Tells you who you may be friends with, how you should dress, or tries to control other elements of your life or relationship.
- Gets jealous when there is no reason.
- Drinks heavily, uses drugs, or tries to get you drunk.
- Berates you for not wanting to get drunk, get high, have sex, or go with them to an isolated or personal place.
- Refuses to let you share any of the expenses of a date and gets angry when you offer to pay.
- Is physically violent to you or others, even if it's "just" grabbing and pushing to get their way.
- Acts in an intimidating way toward you by invading your "personal space" (sits too close, speaks as if they know you much better than they do, touches you when you tell them not to).
- Is unable to handle sexual and emotional frustrations without becoming angry.
- Does not view you as an equal--because they are older, stronger, or sees themselves as smarter or socially superior.
- Goes through extreme, threatening, mood changes (highs & lows).
- Is angry and threatening to the extent that you have changed your life so as not to anger them.



Abuse does not need to be tolerated in any circumstance. You deserve to be respected for who you are and you have every right to expect this respect. Getting out of an abusive relationship may be difficult. Your self-esteem may have been lowered or you may not feel that you have any support.

#### **Help! Where to find it?**

**In an Emergency call 112 or 999**

<b>National Sexual Violence Helpline</b> (For Men and Women)	1800 778888
<b>Women's Aid</b>	24hr National Freephone 1800 341900
<b>Male Advice Live</b> (For men experiencing domestic abuse)	1800 816 588
<b>Dublin Rape Crisis Centre:</b>	1800 816 588



## **BREAKUP**

There is heightened excitement and a sense of euphoria for many of us when we enter romantic relationships and experience a feeling of union with another person. The bliss of feeling understood and the hope that you will experience “the happy ever after fairy tale ending” can feel truly wonderful at the time.

But when the relationship doesn't last, you may be taken by surprise. It's a shock that the person who professed undying love last week now has replaced you in their affections with someone from a holiday encounter. You feel confused about how to get back into socializing especially if you have isolated yourself from others when you were in the midst of relationship bliss. You may feel that you are in an emotional tailspin as you try to recover. You may find yourself experiencing intense emotions that you weren't prepared for. These can include panic, grief, anger and depression. Or maybe you feel that you have “lost” yourself. You may find it hard to imagine going on without your love and even consider suicide as a reaction to the loss of this relationship.

We see students who struggle with these issues and feelings. It's important to remember that you can survive, recover and even grow from this breakup experience.

Breakups hurt but we all go through them in life. Some breakups can be mutual while other times we may just get outright dumped. Either way they can really hurt and shake us to the core!

### **10 TIPS TO GET OVER A BREAKUP**

**Grieve.** Don't distract yourself and block the pain; some breakups are like a death. You have to grieve. In a way, it's as if you are starting over. Realize what happened, let yourself imagine life alone and know you will get through it.

**Cut off intimate contact with your ex.** Sure you might be able to be friends later down the road but if you want to heal, you need to protect yourself. Do not have break up sex. It will not bring you back together; it will only drag out your healing process. Don't keep going back pleading or demanding that the relationship start again. If it's over, it's over.

**Deal with the angry hate phase.** Anger can eat you up so just let it out! Scream into your pillow if you have to. Remember not to blame yourself! Know it was a learning experience for something better out there for you.

**Write down your feelings.** Keep a journal. Sometimes it helps to sort through your feelings. Maybe write poetry. Patterns of relationships may become clearer as you read what you wrote later and you will learn a lot about yourself.

**Think through everything.** Learn from the experience and ask yourself what you want in a relationship. Ask yourself the big question: were you really in love or were you in love with the idea of who you wanted that person to be? Most breakups hurt because we feel rejected and feel that we've lost something. Nevertheless, if they really weren't what you wanted in a partner, then you really haven't lost anything but gained experience.

**Don't worry about your ex.** The person that you need to take care of is you. You have to remember; you always have to take responsibility for yourself. Everyone has their own way of coping and grieving so don't be upset if you hear your ex is out partying already.

**Don't rebound.** Step back for a few months. Don't try to replace your ex and the gap in your heart with an immediate rebound relationship. Doing this will only prolong your pain and self-discovery, as well as play with someone else's heart.

**Talk to your friends.** It's good to have trusted people around you to support you and talk about your feelings. They may be able to offer some good advice and get you back out there having fun again.

**Get out!** Don't just drown your sorrows in your lonely dark bedroom – go outside! Get some exercise. Going for a walk or taking up yoga are great ways to release the mind and decrease feelings of sadness and anger.

**Find yourself.** Take this time to become more independent and make yourself happy. It is important to learn to make yourself happy because no one else can do this for you. Maybe you can take up a hobby or do something you have always wanted to do but were afraid or didn't have time for.

## **Feelings at the End of a Relationship**

The following are common, normal feelings often experienced when a relationship ends. There is no right or wrong feeling to have - we each react to the end of a relationship in our own unique way.

- **Denial.** We can't believe that this is happening to us. We can't believe that the relationship is over.
- **Anger.** We are angry and often enraged at our partner or lover for shaking our world to its core.
- **Fear.** We are frightened by the intensity of our feelings. We are frightened that we may never love or be loved again. We are frightened that we may never survive our loss. But we will.



- **Self-blame.** We blame ourselves for what went wrong and replay our relationship over and over, saying to ourselves, "If only I had done this. If only I had done that".
- **Sadness.** We cry, sometimes for what seems an eternity, for we have suffered a great loss.
- **Guilt.** We feel guilty particularly if we choose to end a relationship. We don't want to hurt our partner. Yet we don't want to stay in a lifeless relationship.
- **Disorientation and confusion.** We don't know who or where we are anymore. Our familiar world has been shattered. We've lost our bearings.
- **Hope.** Initially we may fantasize that there will be reconciliation, that the parting is only temporary, and that our partner will come back to us. As we heal and accept the reality of the ending, we may dare to hope for a newer and better world for ourselves.
- **Bargaining.** We plead with our partner to give us a chance. "Don't go", we say. "I'll change this and I'll change that if only you'll stay".
- **Physical** You may find yourself lacking in energy, unable to focus, lacking in appetite or comfort eating. You may also have difficulty sleeping
- **Relief.** We can be relieved that there is an ending to the pain, the fighting, the torment, the lifelessness of the relationship.

While some of these feelings may seem overwhelming, they are all "normal" reactions and are necessary to the process of healing so that we can eventually move on and engage in other relationships. Be patient with yourself.

### **Additional Information**

For further information on relationships and other related issues please visit <https://www.dcu.ie/counselling/bibliotherapy.shtml> for our bibliotherapy/live wise collection.

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