UNSW’s qualified and experienced counsellors are available Monday - Friday during business hours for free, confidential appointments.

Relationships with family, friends, and especially romantic partners require effort to maintain. Relationships are very important part of our lives, and often give us meaning, purpose, positive emotions, and contribute to an individual’s sense of well-being, self-esteem and security.

Factors to keep in mind:

- Relationships take time to develop
- Relationships can change across time
- All couples experience problems
- How problems and challenges are addressed help define relationships as either healthy or unhealthy
- First step towards developing a positive relationship is your willingness to work at it

Tips to maintain a healthy relationship

- Effective communication
- Mutual respect, trust, honesty, support, fairness, equality, and safety
- Compromise
- Have separate identities
- Non-judgmental towards each other
- Affection, emotional expression
- Spend quality time together
- Openness and willingness to learn new relationship skills

Recognising unhealthy relationships

Discover the signs of an unhealthy relationship and what to do if you are in one.

Signs of an unhealthy relationship

It can be difficult to objectively think about the progress of your relationship. Often friends may comment on how they perceive our relationships, and the impact it is having on us. Sometimes friends can see the negative impact that particular relationships have on us, even if we are unwilling to see it.

Some signs of an unhealthy relationship:

- Poor communication
- Feeling scared, or frightened when your partner is around
- A lack of trust, honesty, or commitment
- Partner stops you from seeing your friends and family
- Partner abuses you emotionally, or physically
• You disagree or argue a lot
• You are swamped by your partner
• Your partner is constantly checking up on you
• You are not equals in the relationship
• Your partner appears to be intent on changing you, rather than accepting you
• Competition between the two of you increases to an unhealthy level
• You accept and assume responsibility for your partner’s abusive behaviour

What do you do if you recognise signs of an unhealthy relationship?

If you recognize that any of these warning signs are present you may need to stop and consider what options are available for you within the relationship.

• Continue with the relationship
• End the relationship
• Attempt to change the relationship

Consider asking yourself about the cost and benefits. What do you gain from the relationship? What are the costs of being in this relationship? Do the costs outweigh the benefits?

You only have control over your own behaviour. You cannot force your partner to behave in a certain way. Making changes in relationship skills that you may like to focus on in such a situation may include:

• Learning to express your feelings assertively
• Learning to negotiate in situations of conflict
• Gaining insight into how your expectations and beliefs affect your interpretation of your partner’s actions.

Dealing with a relationship break up

Learn how to minimise the impact of a relationship breakup and how to deal with your emotions.

Dealing with your emotions

After a relationship ends people typically experience a range of reactions. These can include conflicting emotions.

Conflicting emotions

• Denying the relationship is over
• Feeling surreal
• Feeling angry over the hurt involved
• Fear at how strong your reaction is

Guilt

• Feeling guilty at hurting our partner (due to the ending or things said)
• Think about all the reasons you acted the way you did.
• Try not to ignore the big picture and consider whether you could in reality have acted differently.
• Test your recalled version of events out against the realities of the situation.
• Talk to others about how you feel, they can often remind you of the complexities of the situation if you’re finding it hard to do this for yourself.

Physical reactions

Typically include nausea and weight loss, problems with sleep patterns and the fatigue that can result from this. Problems with concentration on academic work especially work that requires sustained periods of concentration are common.
Dealing with your reactions

Try to adjust your expectations of yourself for a period of time. Rather than expect yourself to be sleeping, eating and studying as you normally would. You should start to feel like your old self again as time passes. Often the first month can be the hardest.

Keep eating

Try to follow your regular eating patterns, eating even if you don't feel hungry. If you are experiencing strong nausea sometimes it helps for a while to eat “bland” tasting foods.

Dealing with sleep problems

If you are having difficulty with sleep, ask yourself whether you have changed your normal routine associated with going to bed. This routine provides us with cues associated with falling asleep and can help to reduce our level of arousal prior to getting into bed.

- Try to re-establish a regular routine again (regular time to go to bed)
- Reduce your caffeine and alcohol intake as this can disrupt sleep
- Accept that some sleep disruption is normal and usually temporary
- Try not to be concerned with the actual hours of sleep you are getting, it is possible to function on relatively short periods of sleep
- Avoid having your clock facing you when you sleep if you are tempted to “clock watch” and worry about how much sleep time you are losing. If you are wide awake and unlikely to fall asleep having woken in the night, get up and do something that is relaxing, such as reading (i.e. not study material), or watch some late night TV. Once you feel yourself feeling sleepy again return to bed again. Repeat this as often as you need in preference to lying in bed and worrying about your sleep.

Studying

You may need to adapt your study routine temporarily. To allow for a reduced capacity to concentrate, break you study into smaller blocks of time and take regular breaks. Reward yourself for study that has been done under difficult circumstances.

Spend time with friends

Feeling distressed, down and sad can be overwhelming at times. Being with friends or people who care about you can help to soothe these feelings. Often there is a time of reflection, where people “replay” the significant events within the relationship, especially around the break-up to try and understand what has occurred. Sometimes this can be accompanied by a re-evaluation of the relationship itself.

Common myths about dating and relationships

Discover common myths about dating and the real facts.

Myth: Girls like guys who take charge on a date.

Fact: It depends on what your interpretation of ‘take charge’ is. Being confident and assertive is very different to being bossy and controlling.

Myth: I’ve spent a lot of time and money on my date. My date owes me sex!

Fact: Your date does not owe you sex. A thank you would be nice, but in a healthy relationship both people are equal.

Myth: My date said “no” but I know that she wants it. I just have to keep pushing.

Fact: It’s always important to take people at their word. If a date says “no”, that person means “no”.
**Myth:** I’m just not hard wired to communicate. My partner will just have to accept me the way that I am.

**Fact:** Some people are better communicators than others. This does not mean that people who find communication difficult can manage without it. Communication isn’t a skill solely for romantic relationships; it is an essential tool of working relationships and friendships. As for expecting that you aren’t capable of change or are not willing to change, reflect on how well your current level of communication is working for you, and also on how you would feel if your partner was not willing to work on enhancing the relationship.

**Myth:** Jealousy and possessiveness are signs of true love.

**Fact:** Jealousy and possessiveness are that the person sees you as a possession. It is the most common early warning sign of abuse. A healthy relationship is one based on trust and respect.

**Myth:** He only hit me once because I pushed him too far. It won’t happen again.

**Fact:** Your partner may feel angry, but there is a difference between feeling angry and acting aggressively. Relationship violence takes place in a pattern, or cycle of violence. There are often periods of apology, and a relief from violence, but these give way to more tension and more violence. One instance of violence is never okay.

**Myth:** If your partner really loved you s/he would change.

**Fact:** Whether or not your partner makes changes is not necessarily an indication of how much s/he loves you. Sometimes, even though your partner loves you s/he may not show it in a way that you would like affection to be demonstrated. For example, you may like to be told that you are loved, whereas your partner may show this in a more demonstrative way (e.g. looking after you, calling to speak to you). Making changes reflect both a willingness to make changes and also an ability to do so. If your partner does not know what changes to make, then you will need to communicate your needs rather than expecting your partner to read your mind – you are also responsible for the relationship. If you have repeatedly communicated your desires and feel that s/he has been repeatedly and deliberately ignored, then you may want to consider what impact this has on your relationship.

**Myth:** I know I’m being treated badly, but without my partner I feel like I’m nothing. At least if I have a partner then I’m worth something because someone wants to be with me.

**Fact:** Placing your self-worth on the fact that someone wants to go out with you is very destructive. What does it say about how much your partner values you if s/he treats you badly? Also, by allowing your partner to treat you badly, are you giving the message that you are a worthy person who deserves respect? Sometimes it is easier to remain in a situation that is familiar, but you also need to ask yourself what impact remaining in this relationship has on your self-worth.

**Myth:** We can remain friends even though we’ve broken up.

**Fact:** Think carefully about remaining in contact after you have broken up. What do you hope to achieve by doing so? If you remain in contact in hope that your partner will realise that you’re meant to be together, then it will only be a setback for you. It is not impossible to rekindle the friendship, but it may take some time for your romantic feelings to lessen in intensity – this may be hard to achieve if you are in constant contact with one another.

**Myth:** We shouldn’t have to work at our relationship if it’s meant to be. It should just happen naturally.

**Fact:** Time and effort is required to make and maintain a healthy relationship. It is quite easy to fall into the trap of thinking that if a relationship is ‘meant to be’ then things will work out without much effort on either part. The reality is that you wouldn’t expect to succeed at your studies even if you were ‘meant to be’ at university without putting some effort in, so why would it be different for relationships? Similarly, if it was ‘meant to be’ that you would be a good long distance runner because of your physique that doesn’t mean that becoming a successful long distance runner would occur without any work.

If you recognize some signs of an unhealthy intimate relationship you can seek help to resolve some of your concerns, rather than undertaking this activity alone. There is no need to feel that you are isolated and that no help is available. Friends and family members may be a great source of support and guidance during difficult times. Numerous supports are available within the community that you can seek assistance from. Most universities employ counsellors who are professionally trained to help when relationship difficulties occur.
Private psychologists and organizations, such as Relationships Australia are also good resources which can be accessed.

This handout is based on the following resources:

- Healthy Relationships. The University of Western Australia. (Online) http://www.share.uwa.edu.au

Videos

We all have non-ideal behaviours that can make our relationships difficult. It is good to try and understand our partners, and also to try and improve our behaviours.

This video is an interesting illustration of how relationships change over time (different 'stages'), and the different emotions that one may experience.

Useful links

**Relationships Australia**

- Provides specialist Counselling in couple and family issues - contact their offices:
  - North-East Region 9418-8800
  - South-West Region 9635-9311

**Other links**

- www.bbc.co.uk
- www.share.uwa.edu.au