

Healthy Relationships

One of the most exciting aspects of coming to college is meeting new people. Romantic relationships may also develop and bring out the best in ourselves and others. However, even the healthiest relationships will experience times of confusion, and challenges. Problems may occur when two people have conflicting expectations of the relationship, are distracted by other academic or personal issues, or have difficulty communicating in ways that their partner can really hear and understand.

While the beginning of relationships is often exciting and effortless, successful long-term relationships involve ongoing effort and compromise by both partners. Because relationship skills are rarely “taught,” sometimes one or both partners may just not know how to establish and maintain a healthy and mutually satisfying relationship.

When you are starting a relationship, it may be 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 and passions so that you have a long list 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 pretty hard in the moment but goes 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, it may be important to recognize that relationships change over time. 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. Changes in life outside your relationship will impact what you want and need from the relationship. Even positive change tends to be stressful, but change is inevitable. Welcoming change as an opportunity to enhance the relationship is more beneficial than trying to keep change from happening.

Periodically set aside time to “check with each other” on changing expectations and goals. These discussions are usually anxiety-provoking, and so it may be tempting to postpone or avoid them altogether. Couples can find that if they ignore difficult topics too long, their relationship may become tumultuous. Strategizing together about changes can strengthen and deepen the relationship and good communication is the key.

Disagreements in a relationship are normal and, if constructively resolved, may actually strengthen the relationship. It is inevitable and normal that there will be times of sadness, tension, or outright anger in the relationship. The key to resolving conflicts in healthy relationships is self-honesty, a willingness to consider your partner’s perspective even if you don’t fully understand it, and communication, communication, communication!

Adapted from “*Healthy Romantic Relationships During College*” brochure by The University of Texas at Austin Counseling & Mental Health Center. For more information visit: <http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/romrelations/romrelations.html>

Art of Communication

1. Expressing Ourselves. When you are stating an opinion, making an observation, or expressing a feeling, the most appropriate format to use is called an "I-statement." The "formula" for "I-statements" is:
"I feel/think/want (express the feeling/thought/desire)..when (state the behavior causing it)...because (identify the reason)..."
2. Responding to Others. When other people are expressing themselves, it is not appropriate to use I-statements when responding. Instead a more effective technique is called "reflection." Reflection is actively listening and saying back, in your own words, the content and/or feeling of what the other person just said. You might start this process with: "I think you are saying..." OR "what I understood you say was..."
3. Fighting Fairly. Basic ground rules for effectively managing a conflict in a relationship include:
 - a. Maintain a spirit of good will - remember, you care about this person
 - b. Avoid attacking one another - discuss behavior, not personalities
 - c. Share your feelings - explore and discuss them
 - d. Focus on the present - past disappointments cannot be changed. Concentrate on the present.
4. Specific Techniques
 - a. Make an appointment to have the discussion. Avoid those times when either of you are fatigued, ill, or under pressure.
 - b. Discuss one issue at a time. Decide what is the uppermost concern and discuss it.
 - c. Be willing to compromise. Avoid trying to win. Try to find a solution that is satisfying for you both.
 - d. Restrain yourself. Dr. Gottman, a prominent researcher in the area of enduring relationships, has found that couples who "edit" themselves and do not say all the angry things they may be thinking are typically the happiest.

Seven 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 your needs.
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 "coaching" early rather than waiting until the situation becomes critical.

If you are feeling distressed about a relationship, you may wish to consider individual or couples counseling. We encourage you to contact Hofstra University's Student Counseling Services at 516-463-6791. Counseling can help with identifying problematic patterns in a current relationship, and help evaluate the characteristics of future relationships. Counseling can also assist individuals and couples in developing new relationship skills.

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