LEARN TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

CAPS

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
As humans we use our relationships with other people to create a life that is rich, meaningful and rewarding. Others also often help us through stressful and challenging times. It is also through our relationships that we form a sense of the kind of person we are.

There is no such thing as a perfect relationship. We do much better when we can accept that there will be challenges in our relationships, handle the stress of these the best we can, and importantly take action to make our relationships healthier.

These pages are all about how we can think about and act to promote optimal relationships across all areas of our lives. They include some exercises to get you thinking, links to helpful resources, and practical strategies that you can try out straight away.
WHAT MAKES A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

How do you know if your relationships are healthy? Below are some of the qualities that help to build meaningful and rewarding relationships that can be found in all types of relationships. Read through them to see what kind of shape your relationships are in.

- Both partners feel free to express their thoughts, feelings and needs
- Each partner maintains his or her own individuality
- Both partners use effective communication skills
- Both partners share some important values and beliefs
- Play, humor and having fun together is commonplace
- There is an ability to effectively resolve conflict and solve problems
- There is a balance of giving and receiving
- Other meaningful relationships and interests exist

If you are in a romantic relationship you might also like to take this Relationship Quiz to help you think about how the relationship is going.

Building healthy relationships takes some work so don’t be discouraged if your relationships don’t have all the qualities outlined above. Instead, identify which qualities are lacking and take steps to develop them.
WHAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIPS DO YOU WANT TO HAVE?

Addressing difficulties in relationships is not comfortable so we need to be clear about our motivation for doing so in order to help us take committed and meaningful action. In addition to the benefits of having healthy relationships outlined above, it can help if we’ve clarified in a very personal way why we value developing healthy relationships.

LEARN TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

The ability to communicate effectively is at the heart of all healthy relationships. Good communication enhances relationships by increasing trust, openness, closeness, and the ability to solve problems and resolve conflict. Conversely, poor communication creates distress, mistrust, frustration and distance in relationships.

Below we will summarise some of the key elements of effective communication. For more detailed explanations and strategies take a look at our Learn To Communicate Effectively pages.

IMPROVE YOUR ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

People tend to value and respond positively to people they perceive to be ‘good listeners’. Being a good listener is a skill that can be developed, and includes the following techniques:

– Paying attention to what the other person is saying and demonstrating that you are doing this through body language
– Providing empathic responses (conveying that you understand how they feel)
– Paraphrasing the content of what is being shared with you
– Asking questions

ASSERTIVENESS

The style of communication we use has a great influence on the quality of our relationships. Assertive communication enhances relationships when there are challenging issues because the goal is to communicate, to give and get respect, and to retain control over our behaviour. When we’re using assertive communication we are:

– open, honest, direct, calm, flexible and appropriate
– willing to compromise
– respectful of others and ourselves
– considerate of others’ needs as well as our own
– more objective about the issues we face in the relationship
PROBLEM-SOLVING AND
CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Disagreement and conflict are an inevitable part of most relationships. Rather than avoid addressing a problem, or acting aggressively to force an outcome that we want, a ‘problem-solving’ approach offers a way of working collaboratively with the other person to find a solution that works for both parties.

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO
PROBLEM-SOLVING

– Accept that there is a situation that needs resolving and commit to working towards a solution that work for both of you
– Define the problem in concrete and specific terms. This includes identifying the people involved and the needs of each person. This is really important since if the problem is not defined properly, the rest of the process may not be effective. Often, identifying a discrepancy in values or beliefs helps to define the problem.
– Gather information. This includes facts as well as feelings.
– Brainstorm potential solutions. Think creatively to come up with as many solutions as possible. Don’t discard any initially.
– Evaluate the potential solutions. Examine each idea to see how well it meets the needs of everyone involved. Negotiation may be necessary at this step.
– Select the best solution. This should be a win-win situation where both parties’ needs are best met.
– Implement the solution. Be specific as to who will do what, when, and how.
– Evaluate. Take another look at the situation to see if the problem still exists. If the problem remains try the process again. If no solution is working, try involving someone else as a mediator.

Another important goal to consider in trying to develop healthy relationships is to be as healthy as you can be yourself. This means being comfortable with who you are, what you are about, and where you are headed in life. Think, read and write about what you value and what is worth pursuing in life. It is a slow and evolving process to become a genuine, authentic individual, but it is highly desirable in terms of individual well-being. In addition, an independent individual who knows who they are is attractive to others. We generally value and respect people who:
– calmly articulate and stand by well-thought-out opinions and decisions
– express self-acceptance in a healthy, non-arrogant way
– take responsibility for their actions, decisions and own happiness
– have a sense of where they are headed and why
– accept they are not perfect and engage in a process of acknowledging and trying to change unhelpful behaviours

If you struggle with these things, why not work through this self-help workbook on improving confidence and self-esteem from the Centre for Clinical Interventions?
**SOME STRATEGIES FOR MEETING NEW PEOPLE**

Sometimes new friendships might seem to develop quite naturally, especially if we’re around people with similar interests, experiences, backgrounds, or values. However, if it’s feeling difficult to make new friends consider that there are probably many things you can do to improve your chances. Below are some things that people often find helpful in creating the conditions to develop new friendships, which could equally help to find to meet a romantic partner also if that is something that is important to you:

**Be where people are.** It may sound obvious but you have to be out there to meet people. Many informal public places offer the opportunity to get talking with people (e.g. cafes, parks), however, it can be really helpful to go to places where you are sure to meet people who share your interests – for example you could **join a student club or society** – there are over 200! Perhaps get back into a sport you enjoyed before you came to uni? How about joining other students in one of the various **volunteer programmes** offered by the student union? There are any number of opportunities to get involved in activities that might fit with your interests. Take a look around, and have a go!

**Make eye contact.** You won’t meet people unless you can establish eye contact. Wherever you are, keep your head up, look around and make eye contact with the people around you.

**Smile!** Don’t underestimate the impression that a smile makes. A smile shows that you’re open, friendly, and welcoming, which can only help with meeting new people. As an experiment, go out today with a genuine smile on your face and see how others respond. You may be surprised to see how many people return your smile.

**Take a chance - make the first move.** Go up to someone and talk to them. Think of a reason to talk to them first, approach them, and start up a conversation. Perhaps they are reading a book that you have read, or would like to read. Ask them what they think about it. What’s the worst that could happen?!!

**Don’t come on too strong.** Pleasant relaxed conversation is best when meeting new people. Keep the conversation positive and general. Avoid disclosing too much about yourself too soon.

**Maintain eye contact and continue to smile** once you have started talking to someone. Doing this lets the other person know you are interested in what they are talking about.

**Nod** to let the other person know you are listening and interested.

**Keep an open posture.** Let your hands fall naturally to your sides, or hold behind your back. Keep your feet roughly shoulder-width apart. Crossed arms or legs can make you seem a little distanced or cold.

**Move closer when someone is talking.** Lean slightly towards them. Again, this lets them know you value what they’re saying. But not too close – don’t want to make them feel uncomfortable!

**Don’t monopolise the conversation** by talking too much about yourself. Ask questions about the other person and listen to their responses.

**Stay connected.** Call or text people, drop them cards, email them. Invite them to do things with you.

**FURTHER READING**

Below are some books which you might find useful. You can obtain these books from the University of Sydney Library, with the call numbers listed under each book.


**SUBJECT INDEX**

- Communication
- Listening
- Nonverbal communication
- Shyness

**WEBSITE**

[www.usyd.edu.au](http://www.usyd.edu.au) – Go to the University Counselling Service for more information and for online registration.

**INDIVIDUAL ASSISTANCE**

The University Counselling and Psychological Services recognises that difficulties in building and maintaining healthy relationships can be a significant factor in students’ mental distress. If you feel this is an issue you struggle with and that it is adversely affecting your mental health, we would welcome you to **make an appointment** with one of our counsellors to discuss ways of helping you to address these difficulties.