

Healthy relationships



FAST FACTS

- There are no set rules when it comes to finding out what type of relationship will work for you but healthy relationships are usually based on respect, honesty, trust and communication.
- All healthy relationships have ups and downs, and learning how to negotiate, discuss and move through the downs together is often what makes a relationship stronger.
- Verbal abuse, emotional abuse (also called psychological or mental abuse), physical abuse, controlling behaviours and sexual abuse are never part of a healthy relationship.
- Relationships should make you feel good about yourself and the other person, and are supposed to make you - on balance - happy.

When we talk about relationships we may picture a married or cohabiting couple who have been together for some time. While this is common, there are many other types of relationships.

What does a relationship look like?

There are no set rules. You may be in a committed relationship, a casual relationship or an open one. Or you may be in an intimate relationship but have chosen not to have sex at the moment. As long as you are both committed to - and happy with - these choices, they can form the basis of a healthy and fulfilling relationship.

Your sexual orientation and gender identification in a relationship can vary too. A relationship could involve people from different sexes (heterosexual) or the same sex ([homosexual](#)). Some people may not have a fixed type of relationship and consider themselves [bisexual](#) or [pansexual](#).

Some relationships involve more than two people while others may include people of significantly

different ages or backgrounds. It can be easy to fall into a stereotypical role in a relationship, for example: passive / dominant, homemaker / earner, feminine / masculine. Don't feel that you have to behave in a certain way in order to maintain a relationship – just being yourself is a lot easier!

What is a healthy relationship?

While types of relationships may appear to vary when observed from the outside, healthy ones are usually based on similar core values. Look closely at any good relationship and you'll discover that respect, honesty, trust and communication are key to its continued success.

This may sound like a lot to think about, but if you treat your partner the same as you would like to be treated, you'll find that relaxing into a relationship comes naturally, without having to think about it.

Signs of a healthy relationship

If you've maintained a relationship for some time, the chances are that you've been through a few typical relationship stages. It can be helpful to have some awareness of these stages including infatuation, disagreements and power struggles, acceptance and appreciation of each other's differences, and facing aspects of oneself.

Talking as honestly and openly as you can as you move through these stages can lead to stability, commitment and contentment, and are signs of a healthy and strong relationship.

However, relationships don't move in set direction or follow a set order, and healthy relationships are not static. Think of them as going in cycles, and that you can be in any one or more of the stages at any given time, taking forward lessons learned from previous cycles.

Should we have sex?

Deciding whether or not to have sex is a very personal decision and needs to feel right for you both. This is known as '[sexual consent](#)' and it applies every time you have sex and to any type of sexual activity.

If you're feeling under any kind of [sexual pressure](#), then it's a sign that you probably aren't ready. In a healthy relationship, you should be able to talk about your feelings and respect one another's decisions about sex, whatever stage you're at.

“On my 17th birthday my boyfriend asked me if I wanted to have sex. I said no, I wasn't ready. He told me he understood and I really respected him for that because I knew he really wanted to have sex.” - Ash

You may choose not to have sex because you just don't want to, you're not ready yet or for religious reasons. Many people are content in intimate relationships and choose not to have sex.

Safer sex

If you decide you want to have sex then it's important to know how to protect yourself and your partner from unwanted pregnancy and [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#) including [HIV](#).

Remember that part of being [ready to have sex](#) is feeling comfortable talking about which contraception to use, and being prepared to use [condoms](#) to help protect yourself and your partner

against STIs.

Dealing with disagreements

Developing a healthy relationship that suits you takes time and exploration. All healthy relationships have ups and downs, and learning to negotiate, discuss and move through the downs together is often what makes a relationship stronger.

When discussing issues:

- give the other person space to speak - good communication is about talking *and* listening
- use questions when responding to show them that you're considering their view
- when it's your turn to talk, be as honest, open and clear as you can
- start with "I" rather than "you," for example, "I feel left out when you don't include me in social situations," rather than, "You always leave me out of conversations when we go out".

Should I end my relationship?

It can be hard to know if and when to [end a relationship](#). However, if you're experiencing more downs than ups, it may be time to consider moving on.

Ultimately, only you can decide if your relationship isn't working for you. If you've tried to talk things through with your partner and still feel upset much of the time, it could be a sign that your relationship has run its course.

Signs of an unhealthy relationship

There are some things that should never be present in a relationship, including verbal abuse, emotional abuse (also called psychological or mental abuse), physical abuse, controlling behaviours and sexual abuse. The following signs will help you identify a bad relationship.

Your partner is constantly:

- putting you down, being critical, judgemental or undermining you
- pressuring you to do things that you don't want to do (sexual or otherwise)
- being extremely jealous or possessive
- trying to control different aspects of your life (such as who you see, where and when, and what you wear)
- you're changing your behaviour because you're afraid of what your partner might do or say.

You may also notice some of these signs in your own behaviour – developing self-awareness and good communication with your partner can stop abusive behaviours from becoming entrenched.

"If only I could reverse time and support my girlfriend, and respect her decision, things may be different now. I really regret forcing her into something she wasn't prepared to do. I can't ever forgive myself because I played her." - Kenneth

Getting help in an abusive relationship

Talking about abuse is never easy, but admitting it to yourself is often the hardest step. The next thing is to tell someone. Think of a friend, relative or teacher who will be supportive and have the maturity to help you navigate further support options.

Making choices can be overwhelming and confusing when you've been abused. Looking online for support is a good place to start as there are many national helplines where advisors can signpost you to further help specific to your situation; they may also offer emotional support.

Talking to a healthcare professional or counsellor is also a good starting point – they can offer confidential advice on next steps.

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Sources:

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