

## What is a Healthy Relationship?

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FOR MOST PEOPLE, FOSTERING SATISFYING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF LIFE.

A close relationship with a friend, family member or an intimate partner can bring a sense of security, enjoyment and fulfillment. At the same time, no relationship is perfect. Everyone experiences conflict and feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction at some time or another.

There are some common features of healthy relationships. These include:

- having the freedom to be your own person
- having room for your own interests and other relationships
- being able to make your own choices without pressure or coercion
- being able to express yourself in a way that is respectful of you and the other person
- trying to understand and accept the other person's feelings and opinions, even when they are upsetting to you or you disagree with them

We all have particular ideas about what a healthy relationship involves. Many people see the following as important:

- respect
- emotional closeness
- trust
- spending time apart
- appreciating the other's qualities
- common, as well as different, interests
- talking and listening
- nonviolence
- affection
- willingness to work on problems together
- honesty
- enjoying time together
- taking responsibility for how you might
- commitment
- contribute to relationship problems
- similar basic values
- belief that the other person is responsible
- for his/her own life

## Fighting Fair

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WE ALL HAVE DISAGREEMENTS. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE ARGUE WITH FRIENDS, ROOMMATES, PROFESSORS AND PARTNERS. THE CHALLENGE IS TO MANAGE CONFLICT IN A WAY THAT IS RESPECTFUL AND PRODUCTIVE.

Here are some tips to help you maintain healthy relationships by improving the quality and outcome of your arguments.:

- **BE CALM.** Take time to settle down. Clarify what you are angry about and what you hope to get out of the discussion (e.g., negotiate a different way to share groceries; have a professor explain why you received a lower mark than you expected). If possible, have the discussion when you and the other person have privacy and time to talk.
- **ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY** for your part in the conflict (e.g., yelling back).
- **AVOID "LOSING IT".** Although the saying goes, "sticks and stones will break my bones...", some words can actually be very damaging. Try and avoid saying things that are hurtful or that you might feel in the moment, but not in the long run (e.g., "I hate you!", "I can't stand living with you").
- **DON'T WAIT TOO LONG** before talking about what is bothering you. In intimate relationships, grievances can build and fester, making the situation worse.

- **STICK TO THE POINT AND STAY IN THE PRESENT.** Avoid using the argument as an opportunity to raise issues from the past.
- **RESPECT FEELINGS.** Avoid the temptation to tell the other person that what they feel or think doesn't make sense or isn't justified. We all have the right to feel the way we do.
- **LISTEN.** As difficult as it is, often the most helpful thing you can do in a disagreement is work to really listen to what the other person has to say. Communicating that you understand (without necessarily agreeing) often diffuses anger and helps people work toward a shared resolution.
- **AGREE TO DISAGREE.** In many circumstances, it is reasonable to express an opinion without needing the other person to agree or change their position.
- **RECOGNIZE THAT THERE MIGHT NOT HAVE TO BE A WINNER OR A LOSER.** The outcome could be a compromise, or it could involve both parties admitting some fault. If you get your way, don't gloat or rub it in. Respect the strength it took for the other person to concede.
- **ALLOW THE DISCUSSION TO END.** When the discussion is finished, resist the temptation to add comments or have the last word. Know when to put it to rest.

## Saying You Are Sorry

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At some time or another, we all do things that hurt others. Showing up late, making an insensitive comment or accidentally damaging something can put a rift in a relationship. An insincere, poorly delivered apology, however, does more harm than good. It's the act of apologizing that often re-establishes goodwill. Learning to apologize well goes a long way toward maintaining satisfying relationships.

### When to apologize

The very best time to apologize is as soon as you realize you've done wrong. It can be tempting to try to relieve guilt by letting time pass, making an excuse, blaming others or even lying. However, your impulse to wait or avoid is a strong signal to you that it's time to act honorably. While it's often uncomfortable, or even difficult, it's worth doing.

### When not to apologize

Some people find themselves constantly apologizing, even when they've done nothing wrong. If you find yourself apologizing for things beyond your control (e.g., someone's bad mood, the limits of your own time, your parents' decisions), then it's time to stop. This "false apologizing" distracts attention from real issues, waters down real apologies and sends you and others the (incorrect) message that you are responsible when you're not.

### How to apologize

- **Acknowledge that you've done something wrong.** Tell the person you have wronged the extent of the offense. Start by saying what you did, using accurate language. Accept responsibility.
- **Explain what you've done.** Don't make excuses. When you explain why you did what you did, both you and the person you've wronged can have increased confidence that it won't happen again.
- **Express your regret.** Apologies have little meaning when they are offered without an expression of sincere remorse. Telling someone you've wronged, "I'm sorry you feel hurt" removes blame from you and leaves the other person feeling even more offended. Say, "I'm really sorry for my hurtful actions. I shouldn't have done that and I won't do it again."
- **Make amends.** Once you've apologized it's time to make reparations (e.g., start showing up on time, stop making hurtful comments, replace the item you damaged). Ask, "What else can I do?" When an injured party feels listened to and valued, you've gone a long way toward repairing relationship damage.

### Once you've apologized

Offering a sincere apology should help you feel better about yourself because you have been brave, honest and committed to making a relationship work. You've also shown a willingness to accept your own imperfections and a desire to do better next time. Forgive yourself and move on. Remember, though, that no matter how real the apology, the person who has been wronged always retains the right to forgive or not.

Beck, M. (2004, September). Always Apologize, Always Explain. O: The Oprah Magazine, pp. 105-108.

# Identifying an Abusive Relationship

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ABUSE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM. MOST COMMONLY, WOMEN ARE THE VICTIMS. STEREOTYPED BELIEFS, MYTHS AND BEHAVIOR ABOUT SEX ROLES FOR WOMEN AND MEN, AND ABOUT WHAT TRUE LOVE IS, ARE OFTEN AT THE ROOT OF ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR.

Women and men in our culture are often socialized to believe that women should be accommodating, care for others at the expense of themselves, and to please men. Women and men are also socialized to believe that it is men's job to protect women, to be in control at all times, and to "call the shots". Further, many young women and men believe that they must be in a relationship to be whole. They believe that they should devote themselves totally to their partner, often to the exclusion of other relationships and interests. Jealousy and possessiveness are sometimes seen as a sign of true love.

When a relationship begins, the individuals often feel connected and committed to each other. Usually, there is little tension and few disagreements. Neither can imagine problems in the relationship. This is a very reinforcing stage in the relationship. Abuse tends to develop gradually over time and because the couple feel so connected, they may minimize the significance and impact of abusive behavior.

**However, abuse is about power and control, not about respect and love.**

Believing that any relationship, even an abusive one, is better than no relationship at all leaves individuals without the support that they need to leave an unhealthy relationship.

Emotional abuse is the foundation of all types of abuse, including physical and sexual abuse.

## **Emotional abuse may take the form of one or more of the following:**

**ISOLATION:** exerting control over what she does, where she goes, who she spends time with, who she talks to.

**VERBAL:** put downs; criticisms; name-calling; mimicking; twisting reality (i.e. making her feel like she is crazy or over-reacting, defining the truth, defining her motivations); threats to hurt her/someone she loves/pets; threats to take the children/or using them to get at her; sarcasm; teasing; swearing at her; ridiculing in the presence of others; treating her like a child; muttering at her; purposefully breaking promises; interrupting her.

**USING HIMSELF:** threats of suicide; sulking; silent treatment; withdrawing affection or sex; unwillingness to resolve conflict; strutting and posturing; storming out.

**INTIMIDATION:** instilling fear by using looks, gestures, tone of voice; yelling; smashing or destroying things; driving recklessly.

**BLAMING:** not taking responsibility for his own actions, words and/or feelings.

**ABUSING MALE PRIVILEGE:** telling her "women are all the same"; degrading her based on her gender; acting like "the king of the castle"; treating her like a slave.

**CONTROLLING RESOURCES, TIME AND SPACE:** making her ask for money; preventing her from holding down a job; taking her money; withholding information; denying her use of the car; not allowing her privacy or quiet time; interrupting her daily schedule (e.g. meals, sleep time, attending to commitments outside of the relationship).

## **Often, emotional abuse is the prelude to other kinds of violence, such as:**

**PHYSICAL ABUSE:** slapping; kicking; punching; shoving; shaking; pushing; pulling; pinching; stabbing; dragging; hitting with hands or objects; biting; scratching; burning; restraining; any physical force or intimidation.

**SEXUAL ABUSE:** any unwanted sexual contact ranging from non-accidental touching to forced intercourse; someone touching or looking at your sexual parts without your consent; being forced to look at or touch the sexual parts of another person's body; being forced to view or participate in pornographic activities.

## Predictable Pattern of Abuse

Abuse often follows a predictable pattern, where the exertion of power and control becomes intensified over time.

- 1. Honeymoon Phase:** Typically the cycle begins with a honeymoon phase characterized by loving, attentive, harmonious times together. The man who is abusive often dotes on his partner by buying gifts, providing excessive compliments and making repeated statements about how important she is to him.
- 2. Tension Building Phase:** This phase is generally followed by a period of building tension in which the man who is abusive begins to criticize, make accusations, and display excessive jealousy.
- 3. Incident Phase:** Eventually the controlling behavior of this phase becomes more intense and severe, often resulting in degradation and humiliation. There may also be physical or sexual abuse. This leaves the woman who is abused feeling worthless and responsible. She may attempt to calm her partner, anticipate his next actions and doubt her perception that abuse is occurring. It is common for the woman who is abused to deny the significance of what is happening, and to feel ambivalent about whether she should end the relationship. Some people in her life may even encourage her to stay with her partner, leading to more confusion.
- 4. Remorse and Reconciliation Phase:** Following the abusive episode, the man who is abusive often exhibits remorsefulness and apologizes excessively for his abuse. He behaves in caring ways and promises to cease the abuse and/or to receive counselling. This creates a false sense of hope that the abuse will not recur. Again, the woman who is abused often believes that she is responsible for helping to make the relationship work, so continues to modify her behavior with the hope of de-escalating or preventing his abuse. She is most vulnerable at this time in the cycle. His attentiveness and promises are comforting and make it difficult for her to realize the full impact of his abuse.
- 5. Resumption of Tension Phase:** Over time, tension builds again, promises are replaced by threats and the abuse escalates. These phases of abuse WILL repeat over time and WILL become more intense and dangerous. Outside assistance is necessary to break this pattern.

Understanding abuse is the first step toward leaving an abusive partner, getting help for your own abusive behavior, or helping someone who is being abused.

## The Impact of Abuse

ABUSE IMPACTS PEOPLE IN OBVIOUS AND SUBTLE (YET POWERFUL) WAYS. OVER TIME, IT:

- erodes self-esteem and confidence
- damages one's sense of hopefulness about life
- damages the ability to trust self and others
- impairs one's ability to be assertive
- increases feelings of anxiety and fearfulness
- contributes to feelings of depression
- shatters one's beliefs that the world is a good and safe place
- results in nightmares and vivid memories of being abused
- leads to social withdrawal, isolation and loneliness
- decreases one's ability to take care of oneself
- impairs one's ability to maintain satisfying relationships with others
- leaves one vulnerable to further abuse
- leaves one more vulnerable to becoming abusive

**Abuse is always the abuser's responsibility** PEOPLE HAVE THE CHOICE TO BEHAVE IN RESPECTFUL AND NONVIOLENT WAYS. ABUSE IS NEVER THE RESULT OF ANYTHING THE ABUSED PERSON HAS SAID OR DONE.

# What to do When There is Relationship Trouble

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In all relationships there will be times when you feel closer to each other than at other times. It is important, however, to watch for and respond to the signs that a relationship is in trouble.

## Signs of relationship trouble

- you stop talking and listening to each other
- substance abuse/problem gambling
- excessive jealousy
- cheating
- controlling behavior
- lying
- frequent criticisms
- emotional abuse
- non-mutual use of pornography
- physical abuse
- you stop seeing your family and friends
- sexual abuse
- not feeling understood
- not feeling supported

## What to do when there is relationship trouble

- Trust your instincts.
- Live by your own values. It is important to be true to yourself.
- Talk to people you trust.
- Seek professional help if you have questions about whether couple counselling could be helpful.
- Let it be ok if your partner will be upset, angry, sad or lonely if you break-up. Relationship break-ups are difficult and stressful experiences. It makes sense for people to react when someone leaves. Trust that, as an adult, your partner can find a way to cope without you.
- Seek professional help right away if your partner threatens to hurt you or him/herself if you end the relationship.
- If you have questions about whether there may be abuse in your relationship, check it out with a counsellor.
- If you know you are in an abusive relationship, seek help to leave.
- Maintain your supportive relationships with others and accept their help.

## Check the library for books about relationships. Below are some suggestions.

- *When Anger Hurts Your Relationship* (2001) by Kim Paleg & Matthew McKay
- *When "I Love You" Turns Violent* (1993) by Scott A. Johnson
- *Do I Have to Give Up Me to be Loved by You?* (2002) by Jordan Paul & Margaret Paul
- *I Only Say This Because I Love You* (2001) by Deborah Tannen
- *The Relationship Cure* (2001) by John Gottman
- *The Dance of Connection* (2001) by Harriet Goldhor Lerner
- *The Dance of Intimacy* (1989) by Harriet Goldhor Lerner
- *The Dance of Anger* (2001) by Harriet Goldhor Lerner
- *Dumped!* (1998) by Sally Warren
- *How to Day No Without Feeling Guilty* (1995) by Patti Breitman & Connie Hatch

# When a Relationship Ends

WHEN AN IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIP ENDS IT IS ONE OF LIFE'S MOST STRESSFUL OCCURRENCES. GRIEF IS THE MOST COMMON RESPONSE TO THIS TYPE OF LOSS. IN FACT, GRIEVING THE END OF A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP IS ADAPTIVE; IT IS NEITHER A WEAKNESS NOR A THING TO BE AVOIDED.

The grief you feel after a break up may be complicated by prior experiences of loss, traumatic events surrounding the relationship (e.g. physical violence), a history of difficult relationships, or other social or personal factors (e.g. lack of social support). It can be especially helpful to seek assistance when a grieving process is complicated by other factors or events.

Some normal reactions to the end of a relationship include:

## THOUGHTS

disbelief  
confusion  
preoccupation  
misgivings  
second thoughts  
"what ifs"

## FEELINGS

anger  
guilt  
relief  
anxiety  
sadness  
hopefulness  
loneliness  
resentment  
abandonment  
emptiness

## BEHAVIOURS

crying  
social withdrawal  
sleep disturbance  
absent-mindedness  
appetite disturbance  
restless over-activity  
dreams of the other  
avoiding going to classes  
treasuring reminders of the other

## PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

dry mouth  
chest pain  
lack of energy  
tightness in your throat  
weakness in your muscles  
hollowness in your stomach  
headaches

## FOLLOWING THE BREAKUP

Immediately following a breakup, many individuals report experiencing a **period of numbness or shock**.

This may occur whether the loss was anticipated (as in the case of a mutual decision to separate after repeated discussions), or was unexpected (as in the case of one partner suddenly announcing the dissolution of the relationship).



Following this period of shock, people may experience a time of **intense emotional upheaval**, during which the full impact of the loss may be experienced. Here, your emotions may be overwhelming and temporarily interfere with your academic, social, or family life. The severity and duration of a grief reaction will vary from person to person.



For most people, the **intense emotional pain of grief subsides**. Eventually, energy is refocused on the future and new relationships.

**If your grief response does not gradually lessen in intensity or, over time, continues to interfere with your academic, social or occupational functioning, then you may benefit from receiving assistance.**

**Avoid letting difficulties resolving grief turn to depressed mood.**

# Ready to Start Again?

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After the break-up of an important relationship it is natural for it to take some time before you move forward with developing a new relationship. Once you feel ready to seek a new relationship, you may wish to consider the following questions:

- Yes  No Are you feeling good about yourself? Liking who you are is a crucial part of finding and maintaining a healthy relationship.
- Yes  No Do you like spending time with you?
- Yes  No Are you engaging in activities that offer opportunities to establish new friendships and acquaintances?
- Yes  No Do you assume that because someone is interested in you that s/he will be a good partner? Remember that you should be choosing, too.
- Yes  No Are you giving yourself a chance to really get to know a potential partner? True intimacy develops over time.
- Yes  No Do you use your instincts and listen to your own reactions about a person's suitability for you?
- Yes  No Do you believe a new relationship will heal past hurts?
- Yes  No Do you tend to over-focus on your partner's needs and ignore your own?
- Yes  No Can you move on quickly and gracefully when you determine a relationship is not right for you?

# What Will I Look For in My Next Relationship

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What qualities do you want in a partner or friend? Use your responses to this section to guide your choices.

__trust	__fun	__time together and apart
__respect	__commitment	__willingness to work on problems together
__honesty	__similar values	__freedom to be myself
__listening	__emotional closeness	__understanding/support
__talking	__no abuse	
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

**When you begin a new relationship, refer back to this list.**

- Are you being true to yourself?
- If you find yourself with someone who doesn't have the qualities you've outlined here, carefully examine what is happening for you.
- It's your right to leave a relationship that's not good for you.

**Remember, it's up to you to make healthy choices for yourself.**