



Your guide to
healthy relationships

Benestar 
Be your best you

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What is a healthy relationship?

You will have many different types of relationships throughout your life – romantic relationships, friendships, professional relationships with colleagues and familial relationships to name a few. Healthy relationships can be defined as a relationship that brings your life more happiness than stress. Of course, it is normal that most relationships will at times be a cause of stress to us, but with healthy relationships, the overarching feelings that they bring us in the long-term are positive.

Healthy relationships are based around five fundamental values:

- 1 **COMMUNICATION**
- 2 **RESPECT**
- 3 **COMPROMISE**
- 4 **TRUST**
- 5 **HEALTHY BOUNDARIES**

Developing and maintaining healthy relationships is an important life skill and, as with all skills, we can always work to improve it no matter what our current skill level is. In this relationship guide, we will take a closer look at the above five values and explore the nature of healthy and unhealthy relationships. The intention is to be able to apply this knowledge to our own relationships and recognise which relationships in our life are working, and which ones may require some effort from both parties to improve. While the principles of healthy relationships can be applied across all types of relationships, romantic relationships introduce certain elements of relating that don't occur in other types of relationships. We have included a specific section on romantic relationships in this guide to address this.

In order to gain a complete understanding of how relationships work, let's reflect on where human relationships have come from and how we have reached where we are today.

Social and cultural anthropology informs us that humans have evolved to be a highly social, community-based species. Historically, we have organised ourselves in collectives, leaning on one another to support our basic needs, such as the securing of shelter, the pursuit of food and water and protection from other humans and animals. More than any other creature on earth, humans are capable of living in complex social groups ranging in size, from families to entire nations. It is because of our highly-evolved communication skills, coupled with the ability for self-expression, that humans dropped the hunter-gatherer style of surviving and instead began to organise themselves in groups for farming purposes. This was the catalyst for the formation of human societies that have spawned civilisation as we know it today.

So how does this evolution of man translate into the present day? We know that beyond supporting basic survival needs, psychology recognises that human relationships have since evolved to meet the following three universal needs that we cannot nurture in ourselves independently:

- 1 COMPANIONSHIP/BELONGING**
- 2 AFFECTION (VERBAL AND PHYSICAL)**
- 3 EMOTIONAL SUPPORT/VALIDATION**

Typically, it is via our romantic relationships that we primarily seek to have these three needs met, but we also look for them to be fulfilled through our relationships with family and friends, albeit to varying degrees. In healthy romantic relationships, a couple can rely on each other to meet these three basic needs, but if one or more ceases to be met, relationship dissatisfaction starts to build.

While these three needs are recognised as our three basic needs, it's important to remember that people have other needs also that are individual to them.



Relationship fundamentals

Healthy relationships, romantic or otherwise, are founded around a range of positive values. Here are five of the core, fundamental values of healthy relationships:

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <p>1 COMMUNICATION</p> | <p>Healthy communication should be open, honest, free-flowing and a “two-way” street, meaning that both parties feel that they are being “heard” by the other. As communication is a pivotal factor in all relationships, we’ve dedicated a chapter to it in this guide.</p> |
| <p>2 RESPECT</p> | <p>Respect requires getting to know a person and accepting them as an equal for how they are and valuing what is important to them without trying to change them. It is as important for each person to respect themselves as it is for them to respect each other. Self-respect plays a crucial role in shaping our relationships because valuing ourselves means we won’t accept ill-treatment from others. Instead, we will choose to surround ourselves only with people who treat us with love and who bring us mainly positive experiences in our lives.</p> |
| <p>3 COMPROMISE</p> | <p>The essence of compromise is working together in a respectful way to come to a decision. When two parties are in disagreement, true compromise involves both individuals making some form of sacrifice to meet the other person halfway.</p> |
| <p>4 TRUST</p> | <p>In healthy relationships, both individuals believe each other without doubt. Trust also refers to the act of being vulnerable with another. For example, sharing highly personal information and knowing that the other person will not betray that trust by sharing the information.</p> |
| <p>5 HEALTHY BOUNDARIES</p> | <p>Each person has their own impression of what is and isn’t acceptable in a relationship. In healthy relationships, individuals feel free to express if they are uncomfortable with the other person’s behaviour, as well as the other person’s expectations for their own behaviour. Healthy boundaries also refers to people remaining independent in their relationship and maintaining a sense of “self,” and not losing their own identity to the relationship.</p> |

Outside of these five fundamentals, there are numerous other traits that exist in healthy relationships. The more positive values that exist between two people, the healthier, more rewarding and fulfilling the relationship will be.

Characteristics of healthy relationships

How many of the following attitudes and behaviours are present in your relationships?

- ✓ You feel free to communicate openly and spontaneously and actively listen to one another
- ✓ Both of you can express your feelings and needs to the other without fear of consequences
- ✓ You take a genuine interest in how each other are getting on in life
- ✓ Rules and boundaries are clear and explicit, but flexible
- ✓ You respect each other's individuality and freedom to hold conflicting opinions
- ✓ You both enjoy doing things for yourself, as well as for the other person
- ✓ Play, humour, and having fun together is regular
- ✓ You do not attempt to "fix" or "change" each other – however, you're open to each other's influences
- ✓ You both practice humility – meaning you're able to let go of the need to "be right"
- ✓ You're both self-confident and secure in your own worth as individuals independent of the relationship
- ✓ You face conflict directly and resolve it fairly, democratically and in a timely fashion
- ✓ You compromise readily and equally – when problems arise that are not easily compromised on, you work together to minimise the fallout
- ✓ You're open to constructive feedback from one another
- ✓ You trust one another and feel secure, comfortable and respected in the relationship
- ✓ You both allow and encourage the other to foster other relationships outside of your mutual one
- ✓ You both maintain your relationships with friends and family
- ✓ You both give and receive equally in the relationship
- ✓ You are sensitive to each other's concerns and feelings
- ✓ Where possible, you both try to honour each other's preferences
- ✓ In social settings, you tend to speak favourably of one and other
- ✓ Mistakes are accepted and learned from and you both forgive one another and move on, recognising that honest mistakes do happen, and giving each other the benefit of the doubt that mistakes are not intentionally made
- ✓ You're comfortable being vulnerable around one another, freely expressing fears and concerns
- ✓ In a sexual relationship, you respect each other's sexual boundaries and communication about sex is open and honest
- ✓ You can enjoy being alone, partaking in activities alone, and privacy is respected by both parties
- ✓ You encourage each other's personal growth and exploration
- ✓ You continue to hold each other in a positive light, even when you get to know the less savoury sides of each other's personalities
- ✓ You show interest in each other's activities – but it doesn't necessarily mean you have to participate in them
- ✓ You see each other as independently responsible for each other's own happiness and refrain from blaming the other when life throws up challenges
- ✓ You live free of the fear of violence from one another

Characteristics of unhealthy relationships

Even healthy relationships can carry some unhealthy characteristics. The difference is that even if a healthy relationship has some negative qualities, the overarching nature of the relationship is one that benefits and brings happiness to both people involved. In an unhealthy relationship, the proportion of negative interactions outnumber the positive ones. There is usually enough negative characteristics present that the long-term effect of the relationship on one or both people involved is one of unhappiness, tensions and stress. In more difficult cases, there can also be worry and fear.

Let's take a look at some common characteristics of unhealthy relationships:

- You neglect your own wellbeing by constantly putting the wishes of the other first
- You feel pressure to change who you are for the other person
- You feel worried or fearful when you disagree with the other person
- You feel pressure to give up the activities you usually used to enjoy
- You feel pressured into agreeing with the other person's points of view
- You feel pressured into changing who you are and what you think to suit the other person
- You feel obliged to justify your actions (e.g., where you go, who you see)
- You lack a sense of privacy and feel forced to share everything with the other person
- Your arguments are resolved unfairly and blame is unjustly assigned
- Arguments erupt into yelling or violence
- Your behaviour or style of dress is covertly controlled or manipulated by the other person (e.g. using casual putdowns) or overtly (e.g. with criticism, threats, fear or violence)
- You don't make the effort to spend quality time with one another
- You have no common friends or you lack respect for each others' friends and family
- One person commands control over the joint resources (e.g., food, money, home, car, etc.)
- In a sexual relationship, you feel obligated to have sex or are forced to do so
- Refusing to use safe sex methods

If you've read through that list and you find that most of these do not apply to your relationships, then that's great. If you found that one of your relationships exhibits many of these characteristics, it doesn't have to mean that it's a lost cause – every relationship needs work in order for it to be sustained. But remember, in order for a relationship to improve, both parties need to be on board with putting in the effort – it can't come from one side alone.

Now read through the list one more time from the point of view of the other people in your life and try to assess whether you could be the one exacting these types of behaviours on someone else – if you find that you might, then it's worth reflecting on how you can eliminate these negative characteristics from your interactions with those around you.

Communication

Communication is the cornerstone of all relationships. It is through communication that we establish, foster and, in some cases, end relationships. We tend to communicate differently in each of our relationships, depending on the nature of the relationship itself. People have differing levels of skills when it comes to communication – but as with all skills, better communication can be practiced and learned.

Communication is about much more than talking – in fact, verbal communication is only one element of communication. Anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell asserted through his research that the verbal component of a face-to-face conversation comprises less than 35% of what is conveyed and that over 65% of communication is done nonverbally. Examples of nonverbal cues in conversations include body language (facial expressions, eye contact and overall body movements) and tone of voice.

Techniques for effective communication in everyday scenarios

Effective communication skills are among the most important skills we can learn in life as a great portion of our time is taken up with interpersonal interaction, be it with family, friends, colleagues or members of our wider community. Effective communication can have a “make-or-break” impact on our lives, as it governs not only how we communicate, but also how other people perceive us. A job interview is a classic scenario, where a person has been selected for interview based upon a sterling résumé – even with great credentials on paper, if a person cannot effectively communicate during the interview, the interviewers are unlikely to be left with a positive impression of the candidate. Behaviours that might impact this impression are eye-contact with interviewers, interrupting interviewers, slouching in the chair, or not listening attentively to the questions and answering irrelevantly. When it comes to our everyday interactions with the people around us, the same principles apply.

The key to effective communication is building good habits. In order to do so, we must create a level of awareness around ourselves in how we speak (volume, tone of voice, clarity of pronunciation) and how we carry ourselves (posture, expressions, eye contact, hand gestures). We also must be aware that communication is a two-way street, and while it is important to us that we are understood, it is equally important that we understand the person or people we are communicating with.

1. Body language

The Scottish mathematician, John Napier, said, “If language was given to men to conceal their thoughts, then gesture’s purpose was to disclose them”. With Birdwhistell’s research pointing to the reality that speech makes up only about 35% of all face to face communication, it is important not to undermine the importance of body language. Body language can help emphasise what we wish to say, but it is also possible for body language to conflict with what we are saying, thereby giving clues (or false clues) to what we are truly feeling or thinking. For example, we’ve all heard that when shaking someone’s hand, a firm handshake is best. However, if you’re in a situation where you’re nervous about giving a weak handshake, your insecurity in the moment may cause you to overshoot the firmness and deliver a bone-crushing shake to the person instead. The person, for their part, could falsely interpret your inappropriate use of force as your trying to assert dominance over them.

Similarly, it’s often said that when a woman plays with her hair while talking to someone, it means she is feeling attracted to the person and is subconsciously flirting. This may very well be true in many situations – or it could mean her hair is in her way and annoying her! So it is important that we pay attention to our own body language and what it may be, falsely or otherwise, communicating to people, while paying attention to that of others also.

For effective communication, aim to include all of these body language basics in your day to day interactions:

- face your body towards the person, which indicates interest in what they have to say
- make relaxed eye-contact with the person
- give affirmation of your comprehension and interest in what they’re expressing by nodding your head and/or smiling where appropriate

Body language experts claim to be able to read what is really going on between two people simply by observing body language. However, the research of Birdwhistell, and others, suggests that while body language is certainly a big giveaway in terms of communication, it shouldn't be considered in isolation. Rather, all elements of communication, both verbal and nonverbal, contribute to the full composition of communication.

It might come as no surprise to many that women are far more apt at reading body language than men. Psychologists at Harvard University conducted a study where they showed short films of a man and woman in conversation with the sound muted. The research participants were asked to decipher the nature of the couple's communication by reading their expressions and body language. The results showed that women correctly read what was happening 87% of the time, in comparison to the men who scored 42% accuracy.

2. Listen well

As communication is two-way, you must play your part when the other person is doing the talking – give them your full attention, maintain eye contact and concentrate on understanding what they are saying. It is normal that at times your attention might wander off the person. If this happens, and you realise you've missed a crucial remark, there is nothing wrong with apologising to the person for missing what they said and asking if they could repeat it – people will appreciate that you are making the effort and care about them enough to fully grasp what they are telling you.

3. Don't interrupt the other person

It is rude to interrupt a person while they are speaking – it breaks their thought process, sidetracking what they wanted to say. If it's necessary to interrupt a person for important reasons, do so by asking if you can interrupt them and apologise for doing so. Once you've stated what you need to say or done what you need to do, invite the person immediately to return to what they had been saying before you stopped them.

4. Stay on topic

Maintain relevancy in conversation – there is no need to bring in irrelevant topics just to have something to say. If you have nothing to contribute, it's better to let the other person continue talking. Staying on topic is also particularly important in heated conversation where the exchange develops into an argument – throwing in off-topic accusations at the other person as a form of point-scoring does nothing to help resolve the conflict.

5. “Be confident” and assertive

This may be easier said than done depending on your level of self-esteem. Remember that everyone has the ability to improve and nurture their levels of confidence. For many people, it's often a case of “fake it till you make it,” where initially they feel insecure about a particular confrontation or interaction that they must have with another person, but they compose themselves enough to disguise these feelings and enter into the dialogue. As the dialogue unfolds, the person may relax and the initial worries and feelings of anxiety fade away. For people with deeper issues of self-esteem, this may not be an option. Low self-esteem can be rooted in a person's previous life experience and require concerted attention to address.

Assertiveness relates to being able to express yourself in a clear, open and reasonable way without undermining yourself or others. It is standing up for yourself confidently and expressing yourself honestly, while also maintaining your composure and being receptive to and respectful of other people's views, be they conflicting or otherwise. Respecting other people's points of view is an important element of assertiveness and does not mean that you are conceding your own standpoint. Rather, it means that you acknowledge the other person as an equal with the same right to their opinion as you have to yours.

Difficult communication – giving and receiving feedback

Whether they mean to or not, people - especially people we are close with - can push our buttons with a simple comment, action, or indeed inaction, and so conflict will arise from time to time. “Fighting” is part of all relationships from time to time, but what distinguishes a healthy relationship is where both parties “fight fairly” when resolving their conflict. Resolving conflict is an important life skill that can be learned.

In order to effectively resolve conflict, a good rule of thumb is to make the communication soft on the person, but firm on the issue. So instead of thinking of it as “fighting,” reframe the process in your mind as “giving and receiving feedback.” Of course, there’s no guaranteeing how the person will receive your feedback, but let’s take a look at what effectively delivering feedback looks like.

1. Start out right by letting the person know you need to talk to them

When addressing a problem with someone, it’s important to get off on the right footing. It is good to start by getting their attention first by asking something as simple as, “can I talk to you?” This lets them know that you’ve got something important you wish to discuss and primes them to offer you their full attention.

2. Feedback should be about behaviour, not personality

The key thing when delivering feedback to someone whose behaviour has upset you is to remember that you must stick to addressing the person’s behaviour only – not elements of their personality. For example, imagine a friend innocently recounted a terribly embarrassing story about you in front of a group of people, which aroused feelings of intense mortification in you. You may feel tempted in a fit of emotion to say such things as, “you are always so thoughtless – you never think of anyone else, only yourself.” If you focus your fury and upset at the person’s personality, the chances are they’ll immediately go on the defensive and rather than considering how they have upset you, they may instead focus only on the criticism you are levelling at them. In the moment, you may experience some relief through your outburst, but you will not have addressed the root of your friend’s behaviour that caused you this upset. Avoid the temptation to attack them personally and instead explain why you are/were upset.

3. Feedback should describe the effect of the person’s behaviour on you

Describe the way that the person’s behaviour made you feel. Using the same example as above, you might say, “telling that embarrassing story about my private life to all those people made me feel utterly humiliated and exposed – almost as if I was reliving the event again. I felt so betrayed, because I told you that story in total confidence. I feel like you broke my trust.” This way of communicating is known as making “I” statements – there is more information on this further on in the guide.

Focusing your feedback on addressing the behaviour, then addressing the feelings that the behaviour evoked in you is the key to good feedback, and it makes it easier for the person receiving your feedback to accept it. After all, neither they nor you have control over how their behaviour made you feel. Delivering your feedback in this way removes the blaming and accusatory tone from the discussion, and so the person is much more likely to respond in a way that you will find acceptable.

Be careful not to confuse or dilute your feedback by using too much detail. Be clear and direct – hinting at your problem is no good, and you can’t expect the other person to read your mind.

Additionally, keep your points as specific as possible – talk only about the specific occasion and the specific behaviour that you want to address. Resist the temptation to say such things as, “you always do this” – this will only take focus off the specific occasion you wish to address and may start a whole new conversation where the person starts to defend your accusation of this behaviour being repetitive. Even if it truly is repetitive, remember that you let it go every time until this moment – so the person may not have been aware that they were engaging in this repetitive, hurtful behaviour, so give them the benefit of the doubt and don’t mention the previous occasions.

4. Deliver your feedback when the event is “fresh”

It is not effective to wait until so much time has passed that the person may not even fully recall the details of the situation or their behaviour that upset you. Moreover, holding onto the memory of the event and the upset it caused you is not good for your mental health or your relationship with the person, so try to address your upset as soon as it is appropriate to do so. Be aware also that choosing your moment to deliver the feedback is important – tired, hungry

or angry people are generally not at their most compassionate, so wait until a moment when they are likely to be more open to receiving your feedback. Similarly, consider your own state of mind and mood – waiting until you’ve calmed down rather than addressing an event when you’re still at your most upset will make it easier for you to keep your composure.

Finally, consider how you would like the person to respond to you when you deliver your feedback – what are the words you would use to describe your ideal reaction from them? Now apply that to yourself, and remember that you too will be on the receiving end of feedback from time to time, so be mindful of your own response when someone confronts you over something and aim to show them the level of compassion and understanding that you yourself would appreciate.

Using “I” statements for better communication

A widely recommended method of communicating your points effectively is using “I” statements that communicate your perspective rather than “attacking” elements of a person’s behaviour that upsets you. Let’s look at some examples:

| ORIGINAL STATEMENT | REPHRASING USING YOUR PERSPECTIVE |
|--|---|
| You never listen! | I’m hurt, because it seems like you’re not interested in what I have to say |
| Why do you never clean up after yourself? | It upsets me when I see a mess that I didn’t make but yet I am the one left to clean it up |
| You never do anything to help around the house | I am exhausted from having to take on so much of the housework on my own |
| You are always nagging me! | I feel pressured when you remind me over and over again to do a chore, because I always do the chore eventually, just maybe not in your expected time frame |



ACTIVITY: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Find ways of rephrasing, from your own perspective, the following common complaints:

You're so messy

.....

You always bombard me with complaints as soon as I come in the door

.....

I'm always the one who initiates sex

.....

I'm sick and tired of always being the one who cooks

.....

How come I'm always the one who has to plan our holidays?

.....

You're so boring – you never want to do anything

.....

I can't even talk to another man/woman without you getting jealous

.....

You flirt with every man/woman you meet

.....

You spend money on stupid things

.....

You're never off your phone

.....

You never want me to see my friends

.....

“Nagging” – a common issue in close relationships

If you live with a person, be they a family member, housemate or romantic partner, you may have experienced nagging, or you may have been the person engaging in the nagging itself. Nagging is a common complaint experienced in situations where people coexist in close quarters, and in extreme cases can drive a wedge between people.

The important thing to remember about nagging is that the person doing it rarely does it with the intent of annoying or demeaning the other person. Rather, it tends to be the outcome of when a person feels like they are not being heard and/or that the repeated behaviours of a person is causing them stress, or resulting in them feeling disrespected. With this in mind, instead of giving into feelings of frustration and anger which may cause you to say something you may regret later, when you are being nagged, ask yourself, “what is the person really trying to communicate to me?” Let’s take the example of a parent nagging a teenage child for never hanging up their wet towel after showering. Is it that the parent wishes to “prod” at their child, and annoy and frustrate them? Or is it more a case of the parent feeling exhausted with constantly having to pick up after their child, and that this small act of consideration on the child’s behalf would be graciously appreciated by the parent? After all, is it not reasonable for a person to feel hurt or frustrated when another person neglects to do something that would make their life easier?

The type of things that people nag about may seem trivial and insignificant to the person who is on the receiving end of the nagging. Remember though that people have different priorities, and if the person’s request is not indecent, then the easiest thing is to agree to follow it. In the case of the teenager above, the simplest response to a barrage of nagging would be to say something like, “I’m sorry, I forgot – thanks for reminding me. I will hang it up from now on.” The key is to disengage emotionally from the nagging – remind yourself that you can’t control the other person’s nagging, but you can control how you respond, and you have the choice not to argue back. Remember also that much as you dislike being nagged, the other person dislikes having to constantly remind you to do tasks that are important to them. Rather than viewing the other person in a negative light as a “nagger,” choose to reframe the situation as a breakdown in communication between you both – something that you are both responsible for and something that you can correct and build from.



Romantic Relationships

The principles of healthy relationships that we've already looked at are also applicable to romantic relationships, but romantic relationships have some extra facets that platonic relationships do not.

In this section, we'll look at the different types and degrees of intimacy and the role they play in romantic relationships. We'll also look at five recognised ways that people express love, and common potential pitfalls in romantic relationships.

What role does intimacy play?

For romantic relationships to be successful and endure overtime, they require intimacy in its varying forms.

Let's take a look at the four types of intimacy identified by Ronald Adler, Professor of Communication, Emeritus, at Santa Barbara City College, and Russell F. Proctor II, Professor of Communication Studies at Northern Kentucky University:

The four types of intimacy

Intellectual intimacy

This occurs when two people can mutually and openly share with each other their thoughts, opinions, and ideas. They don't necessarily have to agree with one another – sharing the same viewpoints is not a prerequisite of intellectual bonding.

Emotional intimacy

This exists when two people trust each other enough to feel comfortable in expressing their feelings, fears, hopes and dreams and each takes the time to listen to the other and understand the emotional side of the other. In doing so, each person is showing their vulnerabilities to the other.

Sexual intimacy

This is often what people assume is meant by "intimacy," but it is only one manifestation of intimacy. Furthermore, while it includes sexual intercourse, it also includes all other forms of sensual activity and expression.

Experiential intimacy

This is when two people spend time in each other's company, not necessarily communicating but being physically present together. Think of it as spending time together engaged in hobbies, for example hiking, dancing, going for walks, engaging in the arts together, or watching your favourite shows together. There is no limit to the range of activities that fall under this type of intimacy.

In romantic relationships that endure over time, it is emotional intimacy that typically helps a couple to establish and maintain their bond. Emotional intimacy is often best explained by manipulating the word to "into me see," because in essence, two people who are emotionally intimate together allow each other to see one another for who they truly are, weaknesses and vulnerabilities included. Let's take a more detailed look at emotionally intimate romantic relationships.

Characteristics of emotionally intimate romantic relationships

Healthy, emotionally intimate romantic relationships are characterised by high levels of trust, warmth and affection, and each intimate relationship varies in breadth and depth. “Breadth” refers to the variety of topics that two people in a relationship discuss, while “depth” refers to the degree to which the information a person shares is personal or private.

Breadth

In a narrow relationship, the two people speak about mainly the same range of topics and in the same context. For example, consider two people who play together on a soccer team – if their conversations revolve chiefly around the sport, the team and nothing more, then their relationship doesn’t feature great breadth. This doesn’t mean their relationship is unhealthy, it just means the two people don’t share a deeply intimate connection. Conversely in a broad relationship, the two people discuss a wide range of topics and in different contexts.

Depth

Depth in a relationship develops over time, where the more two people trust each other, the more personal the information they share with each other becomes. For everyone, our most intimate relationships are those that have great breadth and great depth.

In romantic relationships, our physical attraction to a person often builds over time as the emotional side of the relationship progresses. Effective communication is essential in order to maintain intimacy throughout a long-term, emotionally intimate relationship.

Building emotional intimacy in a romantic relationship through self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is the name given to the act of sharing intimate information about ourselves with another person. The type of information includes such topics as hopes, dreams, fears, emotions, failures, successes, likes, dislikes, sexual preferences and private details of our past (painful or otherwise) that we normally hold back from most people. Self-disclosure is paramount to an emotionally intimate relationship – emotional intimacy cannot be achieved without it.

Within self-disclosure is the necessity for both people to be involved in sharing intimate information. If only one of the people in the relationship is disclosing intimate information about themselves while the other person holds back and maintains only a superficial relationship with the other person, then the relationship will be off-balance and not truly develop in intimacy. It is also essential that the person understands, validates and cares about what their partner is disclosing. If the person speaking does not feel accepted by the listener then they may not disclose something to them in the future, which ultimately stops the development of intimacy.

Self-disclosure not only has the benefit of bringing two people more closely together, but it also has the knock-on effect of reaffirming the people’s affections for each other, because both parties know on a conscious level that sharing deeply personal information is something one only does with someone they like and trust and who one believes has the same reciprocal feelings. Self-disclosure of a deeply personal nature also entails that the person disclosing exposes their vulnerability to the person listening – this ability to be vulnerable with another requires a great deal of trust.

Research reveals that the more often mutual self-disclosure in a relationship occurs, the happier both people feel in that relationship. For some people, the act of disclosing to their partner is significant but for others, often it is their partner’s expression of compassion and understanding to their disclosure that matters most – so be aware of how you react to a partner’s self-disclosure.

Emotional intimacy is a journey rather than a destination, and requires regular tending in order for it to continue to exist. But research shows that the longer an emotionally intimate couple stays together, the lower their rate of disclosure becomes, simply because it levels off naturally the more two people know each other.

“To share your weakness is to make yourself vulnerable; to make yourself vulnerable is to show your strength.”

CRISS JAMI

Physically intimate relationships

Physical intimacy also requires a degree of trust and vulnerability. For example, giving into the physical nature of sex and being naked together requires both parties to expose their vulnerability and trust the other person. But physical intimacy doesn't necessarily require an emotional element to exist – “friends with benefits” arrangements or one-night stands, where people engage in the act of sex without any emotional attachment are an example of this.

A physically intimate relationship that doesn't develop emotionally will remain as a physical relationship only. Ultimately, people report that emotional intimacy in a relationship is more fulfilling over time than one based around physical intimacy alone.

ACTIVITY: HOW TO BUILD EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

Establishing emotional intimacy is a process two people go through, the outcome of which is that both people feel truly connected to and known by the other person. Many relationships in their infancy will abound with moments of self-disclosure naturally, as two people begin the process of opening up and getting to know one another. But it's important not to take for granted that this will always be the case – even the “best” relationships cannot fully run on autopilot; when you actively put effort into your relationship, you will help it to thrive.

5 Things

A well-known technique for building emotional intimacy is through conversational connection. Using the “5 Things” method, you choose a topic, for example, “5 things that made me happy today,” and you each take turns listing your five things. You can also take turns choosing the topic to be discussed. Another technique is you each write numerous topics down on separate pieces of paper and place the pieces in a jar for you to dip into from time to time when you feel the need. This is an easy, enjoyable activity that can help open up and enliven conversation between partners and give glimpses of the other person's character that you might not already have seen, because the topics you cover can be anything you allow your imagination to stretch to and can be as personal and intimate as you're both comfortable with.

Here's some examples of topics to get you started:

- 5 things I'd like to do this month
- 5 things I'd like to do before the end of the year
- 5 reasons I love you
- 5 things I'd do if I had the power to be invisible
- 5 things I'm proud of myself for
- 5 things I'm proud of you for
- 5 places I'd like to go on holiday to
- 5 historical events I'd change if I had a time machine
- 5 hobbies I'd like to try
- 5 things I'd rather have spent my day doing today
- 5 people I look up to and that inspire me
- 5 things I would like you to help me with more
- 5 things I'd like to improve about myself
- 5 things I'm grateful for in life
- 5 things I remember from my childhood
- 5 things I'd like to achieve in 5 years
- 5 epochs I'd like to have been around for
- 5 new things I'd like to learn before age XX

What other topics can you think of that would be fun for you in your relationship to discuss?

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Ways that people show love

Concept of the “5 Love Languages”

Everybody has a deep-seated need to feel appreciated and loved. But the manner in which we express love and appreciation for one another and how we ourselves feel loved varies from person to person.

Marriage and family counsellor, Gary Chapman, put together a list of what he calls the “5 Love Languages,” which is a list of five methods through which people express love to those around them. For most of us, the manner in which love was shown to us as we grew up impacts heavily on our expression of love into adulthood. For example, a person who has grown up in household where the words “I love you” were never spoken – that might seem like a cold, unloving environment to someone who grew up hearing and saying “I love you” in their family all the time. But are the words “I love you” the be all and end all? Can love and affection be conveyed through more than words? What if this person experienced love during their upbringing through the medium of regular hugs or quality time spent on purpose with their family, and if this is the case, then how is their understanding of what love is and how to show love going to compare with that of the other person for whom the words “I love you” mean everything?

Therapists who work with couples who are experiencing relationship difficulties are familiar with the type of scenario where, for example, one partner is feeling that the other doesn’t show them the love or gratitude that they need in order to feel appreciated in the relationship. This partner might agonise over how the other doesn’t say “I love you” often enough or doesn’t make an effort around “spoiling” them for their birthday, Valentine’s Day or other momentous calendar occasions. The second partner, for their part, may lament that their work around the house goes unnoticed – that they’re conscious of doing their share of the chores, making sure the bins are left out on time every week, keeping the grass cut, paying bills on time etc, while always making sure they kiss their partner goodbye every day that they depart for work, when they meet again in the evening, and again before they go to sleep. In this case, the second partner can’t understand why this is not enough for the first partner, and why they need something “more”. If the couple were aware of the varying ways of expressing love, they might realise that they have a clash of “love languages.”

In order to gain deeper understanding of this and of the ways that people show love, let’s take a look at each one more closely:

1. Words of affirmation

This method of showing love relates to the verbal expression of it in all manners, whether that is saying “I love you” outright, or by the use of other words, such as in compliments or words of encouragement. When a person compliments another’s physical appearance, their sense of humour, their work ethic, their ability as a parent, etc., these are all ways of expressing love without necessarily using the “three magic words”.

2. Quality time

This refers to actively spending time together, without distraction, and giving each other your undivided attention – so sitting on the couch together watching TV doesn’t qualify! What does qualify is such things as sitting together talking, with the TV off and no device in hand, eating together, going for walks or hikes, or basically any activity where you are both together, communicating and present for each other.

3. Acts of service

When a person does something that they know the other person will appreciate, this is what we call an “act of service.” Taking out the rubbish, filling/emptying the dishwasher, cooking meals, doing laundry, getting their favourite dessert when shopping for groceries, maintaining their car in good working order by checking the oil levels – these are all examples of acts of service. If they are done out of free will as opposed to obligation, they are considered another way of showing love.



4. Physical touch

Examples of physical touch are hand-holding, kissing, hugging, and intercourse, but it can also be more subtle, such as sitting close to one another as you watch TV. Some people grow up in what is often referred to as “touchy-feely” environments, where physical touch is the norm. For people whose upbringing did not include a lot of physical affection, excessive physical touch can feel extreme and even oppressive, and their rejection of “too much” physical touch from their partner can be misunderstood as a rejection of their partner themselves. It is important to be open about what both people’s needs and expectations are.

5. Gift giving

Some people seem to have a flair for choosing gifts and love to spend time over choosing the right gift for those they love. Gifts don’t need to be expensive or shop-bought – something handmade and simple is also enough to convey a person’s affections. For others, the task of choosing a gift is an anxious one, as maybe they didn’t grow up with the habit of exchanging gifts, or they find it tricky to hone in on an appropriate gift choice. And so not only does the choosing of a gift pose a challenge, but even receiving gifts can be fraught with anxiety and discomfort.

For most of us, the primary way that we express and understand love will fall into one of these five “languages,” with the remaining four coming in behind. As with any language, it is possible to work on learning new ones – for a couple, knowing the primary manner in which their partner expresses and understands love will give each partner more insight into what they can do to express their affections in whichever way is most meaningful to the other person. But remember, identifying a person’s primary love language doesn’t mean that the other four are not important to them at all, and that it’s best for both people if each tries to incorporate the other four in the mix.

ACTIVITY: WHAT IS YOU AND YOUR PARTNER'S PRIMARY "LOVE LANGUAGE"?

Figuring out what you and your partner's primary mediums for feeling and expressing love are is an activity that you can do together.

1. Firstly, take some time separately to think about the times that you felt loved by your partner, and have your partner do this also – how did that feeling of love manifest? For example, was it when they told you in no uncertain terms exactly what you mean to them? Or when you spent a weekend together alone just being with each other and you felt that your partner was present with you and fully “there” for you? Could it be when they thought to leave out your umbrella so you wouldn't forget to bring it when you left the house? Maybe it's how they held your hand or kissed you despite the fact that you were in public? Or that time they saw that item of clothing you'd been admiring was reduced, so bought it for you as a present? Whatever it is, take the time to think carefully about which of the five categories it belongs to, and then continue the process by reflecting on other times you felt loved. Pretty soon you should see a pattern emerging, and one of the five will stand out in prominence. If you're finding that more than one is standing out, that's fine too.
2. Now take some time to reflect on criticisms your partner dishes out to you. While this is an unsavoury task, think about it from the point of view that within the criticism may be little clues about what they feel they are lacking in the relationship – do they “nag” about unfinished housework? Maybe they're an “acts of service” person. Do they complain that you're always pulling out your phone when you're out for dinner together? Then they might prize quality time.
3. When you and your partner have completed point 1 and 2, it's time to agree on putting some time aside to discuss your findings.
4. If you discover that you and your partner's primary love language doesn't match up, that's ok – it just means both of you need to consciously engage in accommodating the other's primary language. Doing so will add a richness to the relationship that will help to keep the feelings of love between you strong. According to Chapman, “if we understand the importance of keeping the love alive in a relationship, then we need to make time to do it. You put it into your schedule, just like you do everything.”
5. Give yourselves a full week of factoring in some time to “speak” each other's primary love language. Chapman recommends that each day you ask each other the question, on a scale of zero to ten, how full is your “love tank,” where “love tank” refers to how well loved the other person is feeling. If you're not at a full ten, ask each other what the other needs in order to “fill it.”

Without having to make huge sacrifices, couples can keep up the habit of checking in with each other for a few minutes every day, finding out if there's something they need and helping to meet that need. While making the effort to learn and “speak” each other's love language isn't a fix for all problems in a relationship, it certainly goes a long way to ensuring that your emotional needs are being tended to, and this in turn can help improve whatever other issues may exist. People need to feel loved and secure in their romantic relationships.

“Love can be expressed and received in all five languages. However, if you don't speak a person's primary love language, that person will not feel loved, even though you may be speaking the other four. Once you are speaking his or her primary love language fluently, then you can sprinkle in the other four and they will be like icing on the cake.”

GARY CHAPMAN, THE 5 LOVE LANGUAGES

Maintaining a sense of “self” in your romantic relationships

In romantic relationships, people have to make a lot of compromises. At the same time, however, it is not good to “give up” yourself. Interdependence in a relationship is healthy – it involves two “whole” people supporting each other through life’s ups and downs, coming together out of a place of affection and trust. Co-dependent relationships arise when one or both people become reliant on the relationship for their identity or sense of self worth, in a sense becoming “swallowed up” by the relationship. In its extreme, it can cause a person to sideline their own happiness and make everything about the other person, focusing on the needs and wants of the other person above anything else.

A healthy relationship should be thought of as being made up of two “whole” individuals. Each person should maintain their identity independent of the other person. Here are ways to help maintain your identity in a healthy romantic relationship:

- Spend time apart from the other person in the company of your own friends and family – it is important for each partner to have friends and activities outside of their relationship. Partners should not always have to do everything together
- Stay true to your values – things that are important to you should remain important to you, whether or not you are in a relationship
- Know and ask for what you want in the relationship – don’t automatically revert to what the other person wants
- If you have goals you’re working towards, keep focused on working to achieve them – nobody should cause you to ditch your personal ambitions
- Keep up your usual hobbies and interests and remain open to picking up new ones – putting time aside to indulge in the things that you enjoy is important at every stage in life
- Spend time by yourself routinely – being able to be content in your own company is a real asset that many people give up without realising when they’re in a relationship. If the relationship ends, it can be difficult for some people to adjust to being alone again
- Just say no – when something doesn’t feel right, don’t be afraid to say so
- Two people in a relationship don’t have to have everything in common. Each person is different, and has different likes and dislikes. It is important to respect each others’ differences, and to allow your partner to be themselves

Think of it as two trees growing side by side – sharing the same environment, weathering the same storms. And although their branches may touch and their roots intertwine, they remain as individual trees in their own right.

It isn't always smooth sailing

Potential pitfalls in a romantic relationship

“Comparison is the thief of joy,” said Theodore Roosevelt – and while he wasn’t speaking about relationships at the time, the essence of this quote is pertinent nonetheless. No matter how “perfect” a couple looks to the outside world, behind closed doors, there’s always a different story as every relationship faces its own unique set of challenges. Common pitfalls that arise in romantic relationships include communication issues, financial woes, differing belief systems, trust or control issues on one or both person’s sides, conflicting parenting styles, differences in sexual drives or desires, conflict over the division of household chores and neglect of the relationship due to time pressures. Any of these problems, or others, could be going on in the privacy of a couple’s relationship without the rest of the world knowing so resist the urge to compare your relationship to that of others in your life. Instead, hold your relationship up to our own ideals and needs, and where there are areas that are lacking, work with your partner to solve them.

A common pitfall in relationships is when one or both of the people involved cease to actively nurture the relationship. A healthy relationship doesn’t just “happen” – it requires that both sides consciously and actively participate in the relationship, similar to what a couple does when they are starting out. This is known as “reciprocity”. If only one person takes an interest in actively nurturing the relationship, then the relationship will be compromised.

Commonly, what occurs over time is that the routine of the relationship can lead people to take each other for granted. At the start of a relationship, people appreciate all the things that their partners do for them. However, as time goes on, people may expect more, but acknowledge a partner’s contributions less often, no longer expressing gratitude for the things that they do for them, which can develop into not even recognising the little things at all. Ultimately, this will drive a wedge between the people, particularly if one or both people begin to feel like the other doesn’t appreciate them. It is therefore important for each person to acknowledge and express appreciation of the other person’s actions for them on a consistent basis.

Another element of active participation in a relationship is keeping things exciting and fun. It is easy for couples to get stuck in a rut, and falling into a routine only limits conversations, creates boredom and can take the fun out of life. A couple that engages actively in the relationship understands the importance of doing novel and exciting activities together on a regular basis, giving them something fresh to talk about and keeping romance alive.

Ultimately, nurturing and sustaining a relationship depends on both people concentrating on what they love about each other. This can be done by thinking about each other positively, by flirting and playing with each other and by consciously making the effort to be together and enjoy each other and have fun. It isn’t something that just happens – it is something that is the result of the relationship that you already have.

Seeking professional help for a relationship

In any type of relationship, if one person threatens violence against the other, the person whose safety is threatened needs to seek professional assistance right away. Call your local emergency services and explain the situation. If there are children involved, the police have clear guidelines for what they can do to ensure your safety and your children’s safety, so put your trust in their ability to help you. The law also provides for protecting people at risk of harm, so there are legal avenues you can pursue to help safeguard yourself and those under your care.

If there is no threat of violence, you may consider seeking professional help for your romantic relationship if any of the following apply:

- When communication has closed down – maybe you’ve stopped talking completely, or you do talk but it’s always negative, or you’re afraid to talk because talking always results in a blazing row
- When one or both of you views the other as an adversary rather than a partner
- When one or both of you are contemplating or actively having an affair

- When you're living separate lives, and intimacy and communication is lacking
- When your sexual habits change – this refers not only to decrease in sexual intimacy, but also to a sudden increase in one person wanting to initiate sexual intimacy (generally this is a result of their trying to fulfil an emotional need rather than a sexual one)
- When you're experiencing ongoing issues over the same subject matter, for example parenting styles, and you simply cannot arrive at a solution together
- When you simply feel like “something” is missing – it's not always easy to identify what it is that you feel is lacking in your relationship, but if you have a general feeling of dread around the topic of your relationship, then it's important to address it, for your own sake and for the other person's

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Relationships and mental health

In recent years, much has been done globally to help reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that one in four people worldwide will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their life. In light of this, it is important that we realise we are all likely to be impacted at some stage in our lives by mental ill health – if not our own mental ill health, then certainly somebody else's. So how do we navigate relationships when we, or someone in our life is experiencing a mental health disorder?

Opening up about your mental ill health

If you live with a mental disorder, the prospect of making new friends or entering into a romantic relationship is a common topic of concern, as you worry if the person will reject you because of your condition. In truth, millions of people globally live with serious mental health disorders and simultaneously enjoy strong, supportive long-term friendships and romantic relationships. In a romantic relationship in particular, the fairest thing for both of you is to be open about your mental health as your commitment to each other starts to build. We've put together some important points to consider when you do so, which can also apply to new friendships:

1. **Timing is an important consideration** - you don't need to delve straight into the details of your health with someone when you are still getting to know each other – you will be the best judge of when to disclose it. Remember that it is best to choose a time when you are well, rather than trying to hide it until you experience an acute episode.
2. **Give people credit for how they might react** – when we are worried about something, we tend to imagine the worst possible outcome. Keep an open mind and give the other person the benefit of the doubt – you might be pleasantly surprised and find that you were worrying for nothing.
3. In bringing up the subject, a helpful way to go about it is to make the person aware before you begin that **what you are about to disclose is difficult for you to talk about**. Start by saying something like, “I want to tell you something that is important to me that you know, and that is difficult for me to talk about. I hope you will be patient with me and listen and try to understand...”
4. Another helpful technique in broaching the topic is to use the “sandwich” method, where you “sandwich” a piece of bad news between two items of good news. For example, you could **begin positively** by explaining how much the relationship means to you and speak about the best aspects of it. You could then lead onto the topic of your mental illness, and then follow up with the next piece of good news, such as treatments you've followed that have helped you, and how living with and overcoming your condition has positively impacted your life. It is also a good idea to prepare in advance some resources that you can give the other person that explain your disorder in more detail – web links, flyers or YouTube videos are good examples of the types of resources you could collate in advance so that they can do some additional learning in their own time.

When you do disclose your condition, there are **three possible outcomes** for how the person may react:

1. They may not carry any prejudice towards mental illness, understanding that everyone faces challenges in their lives and that maintaining a healthy adult relationship means supporting the other person with their struggles.
2. They may decide that they don't want to continue with the relationship. This is why it is important not to wait too long to disclose.
3. They might not know how to react at first and might need time to digest this information – this is the most common reaction. It may be that it is uncharted territory for them, but on learning more about it, they understand and grow comfortable with your situation and support you with it, ultimately making your relationship stronger.

Remember, the fact that a person has begun to build a friendship or romantic relationship with you in the first place means that they already admire elements of your personality, so you're already off to a good start. When you share

the details of your history and challenges, most people will respond positively, recognising your achievements in the face of difficulty.

Relationships when the other person is experiencing mental ill health

Relating to someone who lives with mental illness can be upsetting, frustrating and challenging. The first step in learning how to navigate your relationship is accepting that you cannot change the person – you can only change how you relate to them. The second step should be learning as much as you can about their condition to gain a greater understanding about what they are going through, and remembering that there may be a lot that you don't know about how the person sees things when they are experiencing an acute episode.

The following points are important considerations:

1. Learn to separate the illness from the person – remember that behind the symptoms, there is a person and there is more to them than just their illness.
2. Don't interpret the person's antisocial behaviour as a means of upsetting/embarrassing/frustrating you. Many of the symptoms of mental illness manifest in antisocial behaviours, and while it is normal to be hurt by the actions of the person, don't take their bad behaviour personally, believing that it is their intention to upset you through behaving this way (but in no circumstances should you accept violent behaviour from the person).
3. Work with the person to improve how you relate to one another. Remember that, as with all illnesses, the person will have some days that are worse than others however, there still needs to be basic boundaries and standards for how you both relate. Be clear about your standards, and communicate them openly to the person. One example of this is saying that you won't interact with them if they are shouting at you. For more advice, refer to the effective communication section of this guide.
4. Expand your support network and strengthen connections with other people in your life, such as family and friends. This is likely to be beneficial to both you and the person in your life experiencing mental illness – those who are experiencing an acute episode often need to put their energy and focus into overcoming their symptoms and as a result may not be able to give you the support and attention you need and/or want. It is important to have other people in your life who can support you in the scenario.
5. Be aware that during an acute episode, the person may be experiencing strong feelings of fear or anxiety, have low self esteem or they might be experiencing a delusion or hallucination – all of this could be happening without the person making it known to you.
6. Remember that the illness is not the person's fault.



Improving relationships

Strengthening your connection with friends and family

You don't necessarily need a huge social network in order to feel socially and emotionally whole. Some people are more than content with a small but tight social network while others enjoy having a broad range of connections that range from intimate friendships to casual acquaintances and everything in between. No matter how you prefer to arrange yourself socially, there is always room to improve and strengthen your connection with the people in your life. Some ways that you can do that are:

Make time for them – one of the greatest things you can give someone is your time. Often we expect others to reach out to us to organise catch ups or phone calls, but it can't be a one-way street. Make the effort to be the one to make the first move

Look for the positive instead of the negative – we don't get to choose who our family is, but we can choose how we relate to them. Difficult as it may be, try to focus on the elements of your family members' characters that you admire most and minimise your focus on those that irritate you

Where appropriate, express your appreciation for your friends and family. It might not always be necessary for a person to hear exactly how you care about them – they may already know – but it doesn't hurt to tell them

Praise their accomplishments, strengths and successes – research shows that responding positively to someone else's good news strengthens your bond, so really listen to someone when they're sharing their good news story and actively enjoy their happy moment with them

Work on judging others less – it's easy for our preconceived ideas of the people in our lives to affect our interpretations of why they do or say certain things. Instead of rolling your eyes next time, try to put yourself in their shoes and be more compassionate towards their reasoning

Seek professional help – if you've neglected your relationships and you're not sure where to start to heal them, speak with Benestar – our coaches are experts at helping you to identify ways of overcoming these kinds of challenges, and more

The most important relationship of all – the one you have with yourself

Everybody is born with an inherent instinct for self-worth and appreciation for their own value. For example, a baby will cry until they are given what they need – we literally begin life demanding that our needs are satisfied. Somewhere along the way, many of us start to lose sight of our own unique value as individuals, and eventually may not believe that we are good enough or that we deserve certain good things in life. When we cease to hold ourselves in high regard, we start to accept mediocrity in our lives –one way that manifests is in our acceptance of disrespectful treatment at the hands of others that we surround ourselves with. Conversely, when we respect ourselves, it follows that we will choose to surround ourselves with others who also respect us.

Learning to let go of self degradation can be difficult, especially if we've developed a cycle of it through years of negative feelings towards ourselves, but regardless of how unkind our inner dialogue is, and no matter how long we've let ourselves speak to ourselves in such ways, it remains in our power to end the cycle of negativity and start truly appreciating and, ultimately, loving ourselves for who we are. Here are some ways we can do that:

1. Start treating yourself as you would a close friend

Most of us would be prepared to speak up for a close friend if we were in earshot of someone directing nasty, malicious commentary at them – so why should it be any different when it comes to ourselves? Unfortunately, all too often in our internal dialogue we level the most outrageous abuse at ourselves, heaping putdown upon putdown. Does this sound familiar? The good news is that we can completely undo this cycle of negative self-talk if we draw our awareness to it when it occurs. While it may be difficult at first to catch ourselves in the act, with practice you can learn to stop yourself in your tracks. When you do, imagine what you would say to a friend if they'd been at the receiving end of that same barrage of criticism and literally “say” the same to yourself.

Over time, you can learn to replace your negative self-talk with more loving, forgiving and patient self-talk, which will eventually manifest in a much more confident and positive you.

2. Forgive yourself

The negative cycle of self-talk mentioned above often results in us compounding a feeling of guilt and of blame for actions (or inactions) we've taken in our past. If you've ever found yourself saying things like “it's all my fault that...” or “I wish I had done this differently...” when you're ruminating over your life, then it might be that you're holding yourself to account over and over for events that are long since buried in the past. The problem with this is that you hold yourself back from progressing in life and you also deny yourself the chance to learn from the event, because you wallow in the guilt instead of the wisdom that it offered you. So whatever it is that you may be beating yourself up over, let it go – move on. And don't forget to forgive yourself for it.

3. Recognise that you are equal to everybody else

Avoid putting people up on pedestals – nobody is “better” than you are, and you are a valuable person with your own unique ideas and unique experience of the world. No matter how great someone seems to you, remember that like you (and everyone else), they are perfectly flawed, have inflicted hurt upon people they love at one point or another and have skeletons in their closet that they are not proud of.

Avoid comparing yourself to other people – you are not in competition with anyone. If a little bit of competition, however, helps motivate you in a positive way, then choose to compete with your former self – the “you” of the past.

4. Trust your own feelings and avoid basing your sense of self-worth on what other people think or say of you

When you start relying on compliments and comments from others to inform your sense of self-worth, you start linking your self-worth to shallow, temporary things, such as looks, weight or status etc. These are fleeting things, and though it feels great when someone says you look fabulous since you lost those few kilos, what happens to your self-esteem when invariably the compliments die down and eventually vanish completely? To break the link between the compliments of others and your sense of self-worth, first start by recognising every time you look for approval from others.

You can actively say to yourself privately “I am seeking approval from others in order to feel valued and worthy” or a similar statement in order to bring your focus directly onto the moment. Next, ask yourself this question: “What am I afraid of?” The reason for asking this question is that usually when we seek validation outside of ourselves, it is because we are fearful of something that may or may not be real.

5. Actively take care of yourself

People with a strong sense of self-worth recognise that taking care of themselves both mentally and physically is important, because it’s the least that they deserve! Start scheduling time in your week to do things that will positively benefit your mental and physical wellbeing. Examples might be blocking out time to indulge yourself in things that you enjoy, such as going for a massage, catching up with a friend or family member, meditating, getting an early night, going to the gym, relaxing in the bath, getting your nails done, etc. – whatever it is that brings you joy.

If you struggle with the act of believing that you deserve time to yourself to enhance your wellbeing, you can instead think about it from the point of view that you won’t be of any use to anyone else in your life if you yourself are not doing well.

6. Give people the right to dislike you!

“You can please some of the people all the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time” – John Lydgate, an English monk and poet, figured that out and wrote about it some time in the 15th Century. Yet today, many of us are still working to accept this universal truth. Instead of trying to make everybody like you, recognise that it’s OK if not everyone does. Instead, build on your relationships with people who do.

7. Speak with one of our coaches

Benestar’s team of professionals are available to help you overcome whatever obstacles you need to navigate in order to start cherishing yourself for the valuable person that you are. Call us today to set up an appointment.



Summary

Relationships are hard work. Film, television and, in today's age, social media, may skew our perceptions, portraying people as enjoying wonderful, effortless relationships with friends and family and falling in love and living happily ever after. As a result, some people have misconceptions about the amount of hard work involved in developing and maintaining healthy relationships. At the same time, if two people constantly have to work very hard to keep their relationship going, they need to decide whether it is worth the effort.

Remember that there is no such thing as the "perfect" romantic relationship, and no matter how blissful a couple may look to you, know that behind closed doors in the real world as opposed to what you see in public or on social media, there is always a different story. Every couple struggles, and usually what you see with your own eyes is that couple's best presentation of themselves. Even the healthiest of relationships have some of the negative relationship characteristics.

It is very important to maintain friendships and activities outside of your romantic relationship and not rely solely on your partner to meet all of your needs. Expecting your partner to meet all of your needs is not healthy or realistic – your partner should help you to meet some of your needs, and for the rest, there are lots of other people in your life who can help you.

Healthy relationships are among the most fulfilling experiences available to human kind – but as with most things that are worthwhile, they can be deeply challenging. If you would like support with any element of your relationships, call us today.

Everyone has a desire to be their best – in every area of their life. But sometimes, we all need a little help to get through tough times, to get our health back on track or to strive for higher performance.

If you're looking for an experienced partner to champion the potential of good health in your organisation, talk with us today.

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