

Building Healthy Relationships

Healthy relationships allow for individuality, bring out the best in both people, and invite personal growth.

Choose the specific ideas or techniques presented here that will be most helpful to you.

Getting Close

Developing meaningful relationships is a concern for all of us. Getting close to others, sharing our joys, sorrows, needs, wants, affections, and excitements is risky business. What is it that interferes with us getting close to each other? Often it is one or more of these common fears:

1. *Fear of becoming known as we really are.* Opening ourselves to others and their reactions is not only difficult for us, but is puts a demand on others to be likewise.
2. *Fear of pain and disappointment.* Mass media and advertisers have tried to convince us that we should be 100% happy 24 hours a day. Hurt, pain, disappointment, and loneliness are not comfortable feelings, but they are human. Without the risk of experiencing them, one can never experience loving and being loved.
3. *Fear of losing our freedom.* Can I risk giving up some of mine to care about you without you wanting to take it all away? Can I be both close and separate with you?
4. *Fear of being a taker as well as a giver.* It is difficult for most of us to receive, yet if we don't, no one can experience the joy of giving to us.
5. *Fear of judgment.* People are reluctant to disclose themselves because they dread the moral judgment of their friends, family, minister, and the law.
6. *Fear that showing love and affection is not proper.* This is especially true for men, but NOT restricted to them. Somehow we have been convinced that this is a sign of weakness rather than a sign of courage.

REWARDS For Conquering Our Fears of Getting Close

If we learn to communicate effectively with others and are willing to risk sharing our own feelings and respect other's feelings, many rewards will await us as we learn to get close to another person.

Obviously, a very special relationship. Getting close means you can need someone else and he/she can need you. It means when you feel discouraged or upset, someone is there to comfort and care about you, and you can do likewise. *You acquire faith in yourself, faith in others, and an ability to be faithful to others.* It enables you to live fully in the present and to have meaning and purpose for your own existence.

You become more sensitive to yourself, with choices about how, when, and where you wish to share your feelings. You KNOW when you are experiencing love, joy, anger, etc.

The Art Of Communication

When people are asked what the most important ingredients in a relationship are, communication almost always is on the list. Yet we rarely are taught HOW to communicate effectively. Communication with others boils down to either expressing ourselves or responding to someone else. Yet the methods for doing each are quite different.

Expressing Ourselves

When you are stating an opinion, making an observation, or expressing a feeling, the most appropriate format to use is called an "I-statement." You may even hopefully be already using them.

I-statements allow us to state things in positive terms, to express ourselves directly and honestly, and to take responsibility for what we think, feel, and need while avoiding blaming or accusing others. In contrast, "You-statements" blame the other person, put him/her on the defensive, and often cause communication to be blocked. To simplify things, we can use a kind of "formula" for I-statements:

- "I feel/think/want (express the feeling/thought/desire)... When (state the behavior causing it)..."
- Because (identify the reason)..."

The nice thing about this formula is that we can decide how much of it we want to use. It can be just the first one, or the first two lines, or all three.

Responding to Others

When other people are expressing themselves, it is not appropriate to use I-statements when responding. A more effective technique is called "Reflection."

Reflection is saying back, in your own words, the content and/or feeling of what the other person just said.

Reflection does not question, challenge, argue, approve, or disapprove. We can use an even simpler formula for Reflection:

- "Sounds like you're feeling/thinking/wanting (express the emotion, thought, desire you hear)..."
- Because (state the reason you heard for it)..."

Reflection requires us to listen very carefully to what the other person is actually saying. Yet we also do NOT have to be right in identifying the emotion or reason we hear because the speaker will automatically clarify it for us (and sometimes for him/her in the process).

What we need to remember is that when we use Reflection, the other person is going to continue talking about what he/she is experiencing, so we need to make sure that we have time to listen.

When we first begin using I-statements and Reflection, it can feel artificial. It doesn't take long for them to become automatic. Experiment with them and you may find that your discussions with other people become much more productive and satisfying.

Fighting Fairly

A major stumbling block in any relationship is settling disagreements, which often reduce to emotional shouting matches rather than caring problem-solving. Basic ground rules for effectively facing conflict in a relationship include:

1. Maintain a spirit of good will - remember: you care about this person.
2. Avoid attacking one another - discuss behavior, not personalities.
3. Share your feelings - explore and discuss them.
4. Focus on the present - past disappointments cannot be changed. Concentrate on here and now.

Specific Techniques

1. Choose a time to have the discussion - make it an appointment. Avoid those times when either of you are fatigued, ill, or under pressure.
2. Be specific: take time to reflect on what you are upset about and focus on specific actions, feelings, and attitudes.
3. Listen carefully. Allow each individual uninterrupted time to explain his/her viewpoint.
4. Work on one issue at a time. Decide what is the uppermost concern and discuss it.
5. Ask for reasonable change. Determine what you really want from the person, then ask yourself if it is realistic and authentic. Give the person a chance to correct the situation.
6. Try to accept: be open to the other person's feelings and accept them without being judgmental.
7. Be willing to compromise: avoid trying to win. Try to find a solution that is satisfying for you both.
8. Realize the need to accept an incomplete resolution of a conflict. At times, completely resolving an issue is impossible.
9. If you have extreme difficulty expressing your feelings, try writing them down in a note or letter.

10. After the discussion is over, EXPRESS YOUR APPRECIATION for the other's listening to and discussing the issue with you. Reaffirm your respect and affection for each other. Finish on a positive note.

These strategies can help you establish an atmosphere of cooperative problem-solving. If you feel the relationship has deteriorated to a point where these methods can't be tried, you may want to consider a neutral, non-judgmental third party to mediate the discussions.

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Sexual Relationships and Dating

INTRODUCTION

Many people who have who quit or cut down on their substance use find that meeting people to date and having sexual relationships are big challenges. For some, alcohol or other drugs were a way to feel more confident with others. Also, many people have met their sexual partners by going to bars and clubs. Dating is challenging at the best of times—when dealing with substance use recovery at the same time, it can be positively frightening!

Forming healthy relationships takes time and effort. But there are ways to connect with others that don't involve alcohol or other drugs. This exercise will help you think about and plan how you are going to go about trying some of those ways.

People who are trying to quit using substances and want to date or start a sexual relationship often ask these kinds of questions:

- What does “healthy dating” mean?
- How and where do I meet people who don't misuse substances, and are supportive of my recovery?
- How much information about my substance use issues should I tell someone I'm interested in?

Many people who have substance use issues have also had difficulties having a close relationship. It is OK to choose **not** to focus on dating.

PART 1: WHAT IS A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

PRACTICE EXERCISE

In this exercise, you will learn:

- what a healthy relationship looks like
- how to ask someone for a date
- where you can meet people where drinking or using other drugs is not expected.

Below is a list of qualities that are usually part of a healthy relationship. There is room for you to add some of your own.

How many of these qualities have you had in past relationships? Which ones needed work or were missing? These are some areas to think about as you start dating or meeting potential partners.

- You are with someone who has values and interests similar to yours.
- It takes time to get to know each other and see whether the relationship is right for you.
- The needs of both partners are being met.
- Both partners feel comfortable and safe with one another.
- You can trust the other person with your feelings, ideas, wishes and desires.
- The two partners respect one another's boundaries (e.g., how often to see each other, whether to have sex, what each other's sexual preferences are).

- If you make a commitment not to date other people, you both trust each other's loyalty to the relationship.
- Your partner accepts you for who are (and you accept him or her)—both the good and the bad things.
- If one or both partners aren't looking (or ready) for a serious relationship, this is talked about, understood and accepted.
- One or both partners don't need to use substances in order to feel intimate or have sex.
- Other: _____
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

PART 2: HOW DO I ASK FOR A DATE?

It can take some courage to ask someone you like for a date, especially if you are not using alcohol or other drugs. Here are some simple steps and suggestions that may help:

- It doesn't have to be a big deal! Try thinking about asking someone for a date in these terms: "I'm asking someone to join me in a fun activity—if they say Yes, that's great; if they say No, there's always someone else out there."
- Make eye contact and smile at the person.
- Use a pleasant greeting in an upbeat tone.
- Tell the person about the activity and when it takes place.
- Ask if he or she would like to join you—be direct.
- If the person says he or she is busy, suggest another activity at another time.
- If the person still says No, thank the person and move on. Sometimes people just don't feel a connection.
- If the person says Yes, say that you are pleased, and set a meeting place and time.

PART 3: WHEN AND HOW DO I TALK ABOUT MY SUBSTANCE USE HISTORY?

You may want to wait until you've had a couple of dates with someone before you disclose information about your substance use history and recovery. However, once you have begun to get to know the person, it is important to be honest about what you are going through. Of course, there is always the possibility that the person will decide that he or she does not want to continue the relationship. But if so, it's better to know this sooner rather than later. Your willingness to be honest shows respect for the other person, as well as commitment to yourself and your recovery.

Pick a time when you are both feeling relaxed, and make sure the conversation happens in a private place where you aren't likely to be interrupted.

You might want to start the conversation with a statement such as this: "There's something on my mind that I've been concerned about telling you. I really like you, and I'm hoping that it doesn't get in the way of our spending time together. Is this a good time to talk a bit about this?"

Reread the suggested opening sentence on the previous page, and try putting the same ideas into your own words:

PART 4: PLACES TO GO AND PEOPLE TO MEET

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Now explore some possible places to meet people and things you can do together.

Where to Go*

What other places can you think of to meet people? Brainstorm a list (e.g., special-interest clubs, sporting events, walkathons, health clubs, neighbourhood and community gatherings, volunteer opportunities, continuing education workshops, courses).

What other places can you think of to with someone? Brainstorm a list (e.g., coffee shops, bookstores, movies, film festivals, shopping malls and food courts, museums, libraries, craft fairs, church and community centres, bowling, restaurants).

Tips for Success

- Tell your friends that you are interested in meeting someone. They might know someone who is single who might be right for you.
- Pick places that are easy to get to by public transportation and don't cost too much money (e.g., museums, parks, free community concerts or other events).
- Stay out of bars and clubs and the old "playgrounds" where you may be tempted to use substances.
- Pay attention to your personal hygiene.
- Keep your interactions light and friendly.
- Ask open-ended questions instead of questions that would get a Yes or No answer (e.g., "What made you decide to join this art class?" rather than, "Do you like this class?").
- Do not disclose everything about yourself on the first date. People need time to get to know each other.

Trying out new ways of meeting people may not be easy, but as with anything new, the more you do it, the easier and more natural it becomes.

**List of places to go adapted from Mary Faulkner (2004), Easy Does It Dating Guide for People in Recovery. Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing (p. 93).*

PART 5: WHAT DO YOU VALUE IN A RELATIONSHIP?

PRACTICE EXERCISE

For the last part of this exercise, write down what you value in a relationship and what kind of person you are looking for. Take some time to think about it. Knowing what you want in a partner will help you to reach your goal of developing healthy relationships.

What do you value in a relationship?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What kind of person are you looking for?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON SEXUAL HEALTH

If you have any physical issues that make having sex uncomfortable or difficult (e.g., vaginal dryness or difficulty getting or maintaining an erection), talk to your doctor. Problems such as these may be related to substance use, and may disappear as you quit or cut down on your use of alcohol or other drugs. If they are still an issue, they may be treatable with medication, depending on the type of problem, the length of time it has been an issue for you, your age and your medical history.

You might find it helpful to keep this exercise in a place where you can refer back to it easily to inspire and motivate yourself. Good luck!

Healthy Relationships

When you have substance use issues, you may become isolated and disconnected from significant people in your life. But healthy relationships are especially important to your sense of self-worth and personal growth.

In all relationships, including intimate ones, it is important to maintain appropriate personal boundaries. In other words, you have a right to your own unique feelings and needs. Boundaries are like a fence with a gate. You decide when and how much to open the gate based on how you feel emotionally and physically. Pay attention to your thoughts, feelings and immediate (“gut”) reactions.

In healthy relationships, your needs and feelings are heard and respected. Taking care of others, or rescuing, changing or controlling other people, can contribute to an imbalance in your relationships. Examples of how you can take care of yourself include telling yourself, “I won’t allow alcohol or other drugs in my home,” “I won’t allow anyone to verbally abuse me” or “I won’t lend money to anyone except my family members.” Resources such as support groups, family services and drop-in centres are easy to access, and they can support you in making decisions and help you to improve your relationships with others.

Good, healthy relationships are a fair exchange. The costs to you should be about equal to the rewards. Keep in mind that the value of costs and rewards is personal. The value of something to one person may not be the same to another.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Think about the current relationship(s) in your life as you answer the questions below.

1. What kinds of things do you value in a relationship?

2. How have alcohol and other drugs affected your relationships?

3. What do you need to change about your relationship(s) in order to help you meet your goals for changing your use of alcohol and other drugs?

4. What steps must you take to make these changes and improve your relationship(s)?

Characteristics of Healthy People And Healthy Relationships

Nine Traits of Healthy People: (Circle the ones you have!)

1. I am willing to ask honest questions and give honest answers.
2. I am my own person and I make decisions based on my own personal values and beliefs.
3. I am able to give positive support to others and receive positive support from them.
4. I respect other people's right to have their beliefs even when I don't agree with them.
5. I am willing to try something new or consider looking at a problem in a different way.
6. I use my sense of humor to see the funny side of life.
7. I treat other people decently and try to do the right thing even when it is difficult.
8. I support my friends' values and their decisions to do what is right for them as long as they are not harmed.
9. I see my relationships and friendships as they are and not as I wish them to be.

Healthy Relationship Characteristics: (Circle the ones you and your dating partner share!)

1. My partner and I are able to be fair with each other.
2. My partner speaks to me in a way that helps me to feel safe and secure when we are together.
3. My partner and I value honesty and sharing each other's opinions and beliefs.
4. I am able to set boundaries with my partner and talk openly about what I am comfortable doing and what I am not comfortable doing.
5. My partner and I can admit when we are wrong and apologize to each other when needed.
6. I feel respected by my partner.
7. I trust my partner not to harm me physically, sexually or emotionally.
8. I balance time with my friends and time with my partner.
9. I can speak up about anything to my partner and experience mutual understanding and kindness.