

Healthy relationships



TIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The first thing to ask yourself about a relationship is, 'How do I feel when I'm with _____?'

There is no correct answer to this question. Confusing, isn't it? We're so used to being told what to do, where to go and how to think that it is confronting to have to rely on yourself.

If you go back to the question, 'How do I feel when I'm with _____?' and check in with your body, you might get some surprising answers.

You might feel a tingling or a sinking feeling, you may feel cut off, as though the lights are on but nobody is home or you may feel as though you are as light as air, the sky is the limit.

Now ask yourself, 'Which feelings would I like to have?' These are the feelings that will tell you whether or not a relationship is good for you.

Try and focus on how **you** feel, not on how you think your family and friends feel.

It's pretty normal to want your family and friends to accept the person you like, but it's more important that you really like who you're thinking about.

Is it that simple? The answer is both yes and no.

If you have a family that have supported you and who have treated you with love and respect, you have a greater likelihood of being able to trust yourself and your instincts regarding other people.

If you have come from a family in which the expression of love and respect has been trickier, it may be harder to listen to and trust in yourself. When this happens it is a good idea to think about films you have seen, books you have read and relationships you have observed.

When you look around the world (real and fictional) what relationships do you notice? How do the people in those relationships behave towards each other?

What do you admire about how the people express themselves to each other and how they listen to each other? What activities do they do together, how do they look at each other, how do they talk about each other?

Activity

We can all support ourselves by imagining how someone we admire would support someone in our situation.

Consider the following scenarios:

1. You like someone and want them to like you back.
2. You gather the courage and tell someone that you like them, but they tell you that they don't feel the same way.

Now, imagine that you are one of the people or characters that you really admire. What advice and support would you give yourself in these situations?

Practicing empathy

If you find yourself really liking somebody, does it become harder to talk to that person? Do you find yourself tongue-tied?

What about if you dislike a person? Is it hard to try and understand their thoughts, feelings and actions?

In either case it's important to try and figure out what the world might be like for that person.

This is what empathy is - the ability to imagine what another person is thinking, feeling and doing. It can be really hard to feel empathy if you're judging the person as really 'good' or really 'bad'.

You don't have to stop judging them but, rather, you can decide to put your judgement to one side. Imagine putting it in a box that you can come back to later.

Once you've done this you can start to discover the world from the perspective of the other person.

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Asking someone out

Start by getting to know the person. This will give you a better chance of creating space for a healthy, intimate exchange. If you're shy, it can help to have some questions prepared like:

- what sort of music do you like?
- what sports do you play or hobbies do you have?
- what's your idea of a great holiday?
- what are two of your favourite movies?
- do you have any pets?
- do you prefer dogs or cats?

If these questions feel a bit clichéd or unhelpful, talk to some friends and brainstorm other questions. It can be really hard if you really like somebody to simply walk up to them and begin a conversation.

At least if you have thought about some questions, you will have something to turn to when you feel yourself start to freeze up.

Intimate relationships

If you have managed to get the conversation going and decide to go out on a date, how do you decide whether or not to get physical with the person you like?

Lots of people want to engage with their sexuality and that's okay, as long as you're safe.

Safety can mean checking out places such as [Family Planning Victoria](http://www.fpv.org.au) at www.fpv.org.au.

It can also mean that you stay in an environment where your friends or other people are around to support you if anything goes wrong.

Remember that if you start to get physical and change your mind, that is okay. 'No' means 'no' even if you started with 'yes'.

It can sometimes be really hard to say no if you like somebody. The best way to say no when you want to say yes to an ongoing intimate relationship is by talking about it.

You could say something like, 'I think you're great and I want to spend time with you, to do X, Y and Z with you, but right now I'm not ready to have sex or to get physical, is that okay with you?'

If you've chosen someone who isn't okay with this, remember that it's their problem and you need to do what's right for you.



What makes a healthy intimate relationship?

- **Equality:** Both people that they can talk about their experiences or speak their mind without feeling worried, scared or criticised.
- **Mutual respect:** Respecting your partner's opinion even if it's different from yours. You don't have to agree on everything to be close.
- **Trust:** You feel confident that your partner will behave in a pretty consistent and respectful way towards you.
- **Good communication:** Talking and listening, and listening and talking. Having insight about yourself and empathy for your partner.
- **Separate identities:** Both of you can be yourself, whilst still being together.
- **Supporting your partner and having fun:** Supporting each other to pursue your interests.

According to the Gottman Institute, which applies leading-edge research to how relationships work, a ratio of 5 to 1 of positive to negative moments is a good measure for maintaining a healthy intimate relationship.

What that means is that for every negative moment in the relationship, there should be 5 positive experiences.

Alcohol and other drugs (AOD)

Some people use alcohol and drugs to deal with the nerves of going out with somebody they really like.

Without getting into the ins and outs of AOD, know that this approach can quickly backfire. If you really like somebody, but end up throwing up all over them or making out with their best friend because you were so out of it, the relationship isn't going to travel so well.

If you're really nervous, that's really normal! Don't try and push the nerves away, they're part of the fun.

Just like you did with your judgements, notice your nerves and see if you can put them in an imaginary box beside you.

They'll keep trying to jump up and grab your attention, just like a puppy or kitten jumps up to get your attention. Treat them as you would the puppy or kitten, acknowledge them and invite them to get back in the box.

To find out more about AOD, visit headspace.org.au/young-people/alcohol-and-other-drugs

So, it's a relationship?

So, you've overcome your nerves and you've been seeing each other for a couple of months. Now is a great time to check with yourself and figure out if you're happy and want to continue the relationship. A good starting point is to think about whether your relationship has three important parts: 'Me', 'You' and 'We'.

Me means that you still need to have time to do things on your own, with your friends, with your family, as does the person you are in a relationship with – **You**.

Remember that your friends and family love you, but in a different way to your partner. That means they may not be the love of your life, but they do love you and will probably always be there for you, so it's important to make time for them.

The **We** part is just as important – you and your partner need to do things together and keep sharing new moments and experiences.

Tricky feelings and times – jealousy and communication

So you've got some independence and you've got some connection in your relationship. What do you do if someone else is sending instant messages to the person you're dating, and you're worried that they're cheating on you? What if they've read but not responded to your Facebook post and you're left dangling for hours?

Should you respond with, 'I knew you'd end up cheating on me', or, 'You don't care about anybody but yourself'? How critical can you be before your partner becomes defensive?

There's no such thing as positive criticism. Criticism often leads to people becoming defensive, scornful, or they might shut down completely and refuse to talk or communicate with you.

It's okay to get a bit jealous sometimes. Jealousy is a normal feeling that's important to be aware of and to acknowledge. However, acting on this by trying to control who your partner talks to is not okay.

Instead of criticising and being judgemental, **use your communication and assertiveness skills to talk about how you're feeling and what your needs are.**

For example, use phrases like, 'I feel _____ about _____' and 'What I would like/need is _____'. Allow your partner to respond, and listen to what they have to say.

Rather than being defensive, take a breath and consider whether you might also be responsible for part of the problem, and take ownership of this.

Need more help?

Remember that you don't have to deal with things on your own.

Deciding to get help is a sometimes-tough but brave first step in dealing with relationship issues.

If any of the information we've talked about here has concerned you, or you'd like to chat to someone about what's going on for you, help is available.

You can start by talking to a trusted adult such as a parent, carer, family member, teacher or school counsellor and telling them how you're feeling.

If you feel unsafe at any time, call 000 (triple zero). For 24/7 support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

To make an appointment to chat to one of our counsellors, visit www.rav.org.au/counselling

To find other organisations that can help, visit www.rav.org.au/resources/youth-services

For more free resources on topics such as good communication and managing conflict, visit www.rav.org.au/resources and select 'Relationships and communication' from the 'Resource topic' menu.

About us

Relationships Australia Victoria has over 70 years' experience providing family and relationship support services across Melbourne and Victoria.

We are committed to providing safe, inclusive and accessible services for all people.



We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways of Australia and we support Aboriginal people's right to self-determination and culturally safe services.

We recognise the lifelong impacts of childhood trauma.

We recognise those who had children taken away from them.