

# A Guide to Healthy Relationships

By Robyn Coombs, Psy.D.

A relationship can be similar to a roller coaster, where the couple experiences many ups and downs, as well as twists and turns. They may start off and move at a slow and steady pace or a rapid and fluctuating pace. However, throughout all the excitement, a variety of thoughts, feelings and behaviors arise within each individual as well as within the relationship. Some may be shared by both partners, while others are uniquely experienced.

Contrary to popular belief, men and women are not from different planets. However, gender differences do exist in the manner that men and women relate to, and communicate with one another and the world they live in. Some differences between men and women include:

- **How they connect with one another**

Men connect through mutual activities, while women connect through talking to one another.

- **How they express their comfort in a relationship**

Men enjoy the freedom to remain silent when comfortable in a relationship, while women enjoy the freedom to be able to speak without judgment when comfortable in a relationship.

- **What their needs are when upset and/or bothered**

Men need space, while women need support and understanding.

- **How they prefer to approach problems and/or conflict**

Men think silently and prefer to internally figure things out, while women think out loud and prefer to share their thought processes.

These differences are normal and to be expected. However, it is important to be aware of, understand and appreciate gender differences when developing and maintaining a relationship.

Aside from the consideration of gender differences, it is necessary to determine whether a relationship is in fact a healthy one. Many share the idea that relationships are expected to be perfect, similar to what may be found in movies, television programs and song lyrics. However, this notion is not based in reality and would be next to impossible to find and maintain, because most relationships will have times of disagreement, frustration and disappointment.

There are several qualities that help determine whether a relationship is healthy or unhealthy. In healthy relationships, partners:

- Treat each other with trust and respect
- Feel secure and comfortable
- Resolve conflicts safely and adequately
- Do not control one another or resort to violence
- Share in decision-making and compromise
- Take interest in, are supportive of and encourage each other
- Allow time for one's own interests and friends/family
- Are sexual with one another by choice
- Communicate clearly, openly and honestly
- Enjoy the time spent with each other

On the other hand, in unhealthy relationships, one or both partners:

- Attempts to control and/or manipulate the other
- Ridicules, name calls and/or makes the other feel bad for himself/herself
- Does not make time for the other and/or the relationship
- Is afraid of the other's temper
- Threatens to harm the other and/or objects of personal value

- Is physically, sexually and/or mentally aggressive
- Ignores or disregards the other when speaking
- Is overly possessive and/or jealous about ordinary behavior
- Criticizes the other's friends and/or family
- Discourages friendships/relationships with friends and/or family

Thus, in healthy relationships, individuals seek enjoyment, enrichment and a sense of personal growth, which paves a pathway for happiness and minimal stress. In unhealthy relationships, individuals may be left feeling uncomfortable, hurt and angry, which paves a pathway for unhappiness and undesirable distress.

It takes care, commitment and compromise to have a healthy and satisfying relationship. Also, both partners should be aware and accepting of individual differences as well as one another's thoughts, feelings and needs. Further, in times of conflict, it is important to have a willingness to work together, so problems can be resolved adequately. Nevertheless, over time, relationships change. This may be due to the progression or regression of a relationship or because of changes in outside areas that affect the relationship. Regardless of the reason, with change comes stress, which can have a major impact on the relationship. Therefore, when a relationship seems to be "rocky," one should consider the following:

- How does each partner make the other feel?
- Has the relationship been different in the past?
- Have there been past problems that were left unresolved and are now resurfacing?
- Is there a current stressor that may be impacting the relationship, such as a recent move, job change, financial burden or personal/family crisis?
- What specifically seems to be bothersome?
- What actions would help promote change and offer greater comfort in the relationship?
- Can each partner discuss his/her feelings, fears and concerns in a calm and rational manner?

A key factor in determining if a relationship will last through tough times is knowing oneself and one's own personal and relationship needs. This involves flexibility, compromise and the willingness to change, to allow for adequate give-and-take in the relationship. Inflexibility is unhealthy and will lead to one or both partners feeling unsatisfied.

Thus, clear, careful and respectful communication about one's own wants and needs is important, as well as adequate compromise and problem resolution, so both partners can satisfy their own needs and the needs of the partner. Remember, healthy relationships allow for individuality and personal growth, and are mutually beneficial.

Please note that if a partner is being physically, sexually and/or emotionally abusive, or is engaging in and/or encouraging unsafe or harmful behaviors, then this is a "red flag" for the relationship. One and/or both partners may need to seek professional help. Everyone deserves to be treated fairly and respectfully, and to feel safe and comfortable within a relationship. Remember, everyone has the option to leave a relationship.

Some relationships just do not work for whatever reason, and it may be difficult to overcome the sense of loss. It is natural to grieve and go through a healing process, because most relationships carry feelings of love, care and trust. The following are some ways to help cope with the loss:

- Take time to experience and express emotions like sadness, anger or hurt, because denying these feelings will only prolong them.
- Do not use guilt, self-blame and/or bargaining to end the relationship, as one cannot control another person's thoughts, feelings or behaviors.
- Recognize and accept the reasons why the relationship ended.
- Allow for time without high pressure or demands, and mobilize an effective support system.
- Take care of oneself during the process through self-renewal and various self-help practices.

*For additional relationship articles,  
visit the CAPS Web site at  
[www.fit.edu/caps](http://www.fit.edu/caps)*

### **15 Quick Tips for Making a Relationship Work**

- 1—Be yourself and take care of yourself.
- 2—Communicate in an open and honest manner.
- 3—Be actively concerned about your partner's growth and happiness.
- 4—Give equal importance to each other's thoughts, feelings, needs and interests.
- 5—Do not attempt to control and/or manipulate your partner.
- 6—Treat one another as equals in the relationship.
- 7—Keep your life balanced.
- 8—Be honest, dependable and trustworthy.
- 9—Express support, appreciation and emotional warmth for your partner regularly.
- 10—Keep wants, needs and expectations realistic.
- 11—Accept each other's individual differences.
- 12—Fight fair and resolve conflict through negotiation and compromise.
- 13—Learn to agree to disagree and not hold grudges.
- 14—Be flexible with change.
- 15—Enjoy each other and spend quality time together.

*Florida Institute  
of Technology*

Counseling and Psychological Services  
150 W. University Blvd. • Melbourne, FL 32901-6975  
(321) 674-8050

PY-610-1105

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