Let's stay connected.

YW Healthy Relationships Toolkit

YWCA CALGARY
women-centred.
brighter-future focused.

Table of Contents

Introduction to Healthy Relationships

Why focus on healthy relationships?

Humans are by nature social creatures. We connect with those whom we may share similar likes, interests, ideologies and values. Once we establish a connection with someone, a relationship is formed. Having valuable and meaningful relationships is vital to our mental health and emotional well-being. However, we can also encounter relationships that leave us feeling insecure, defeated, hurt and isolated. It is in these relationships where unhealthy behaviours may be occurring and risk for abuse is high.

By centering our focus on healthy relationships, we can begin working towards preventing violence and abuse in communities. While it may not seem like there is a connection between the two, there are strong correlations with dynamics in healthy relationships and domestic violence prevention. Therefore, it is important to discuss what healthy relationships are, how they are built and how we can maintain them.
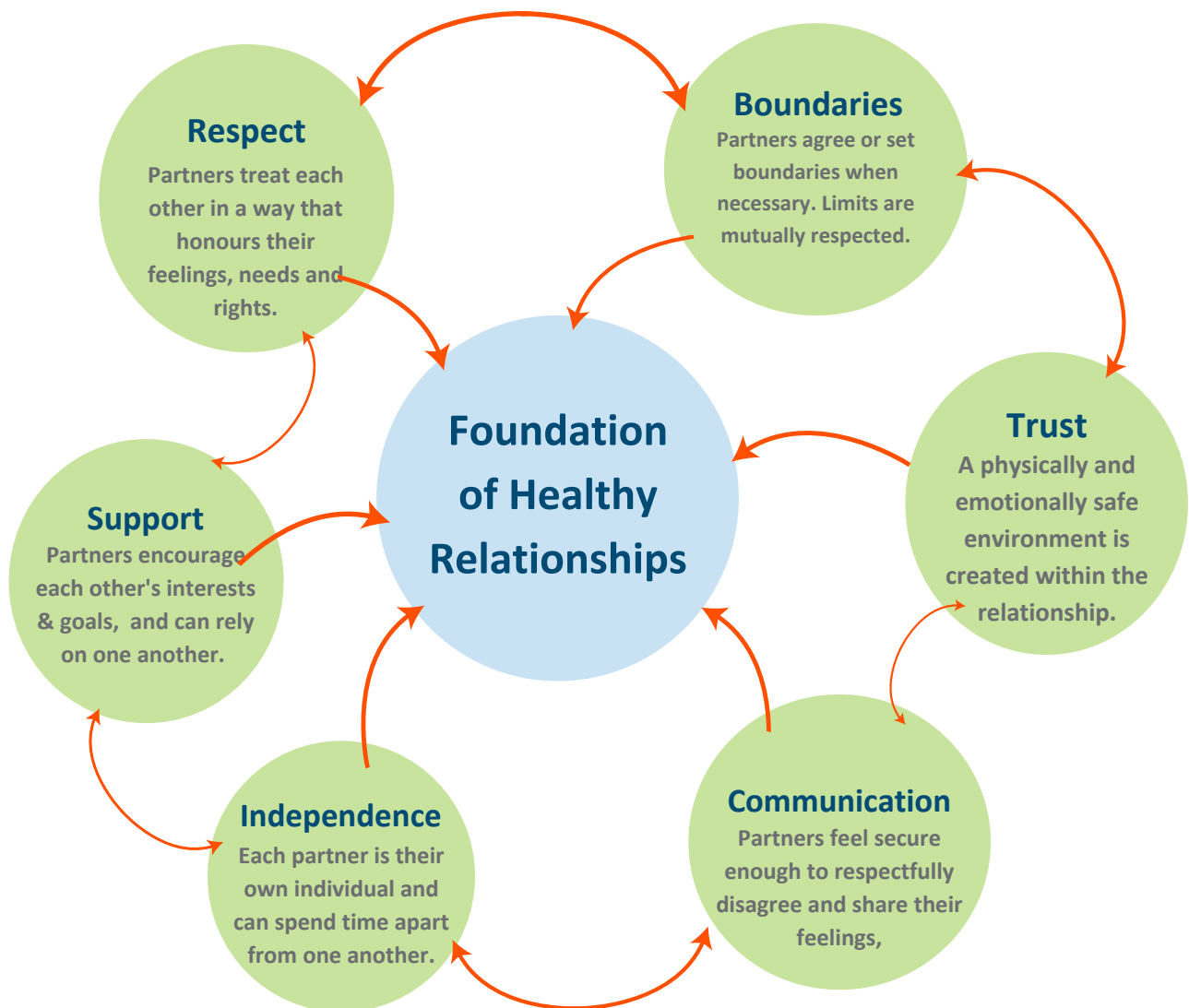
What is a healthy relationship?

The Government of Alberta defines healthy relationships as the foundation of safe and caring [1] communities. Children who grow up with adults in a healthy relationship are more likely to thrive and flourish. As adults, having healthy relationships with the various people in our lives provides us with a supportive network and secure base to better navigate through life stressors. Other key benefits include:

> **Encouraging personal growth**   > **Adding meaning to our lives**

> **Improving health and well-being**   > **Decreasing stress**

The graphic below illustrates six characteristics that build the foundation of healthy relationships. Please note, the term 'partner' refers to each person in any relationship and is not restricted to romantic relationships.   [2], [3]
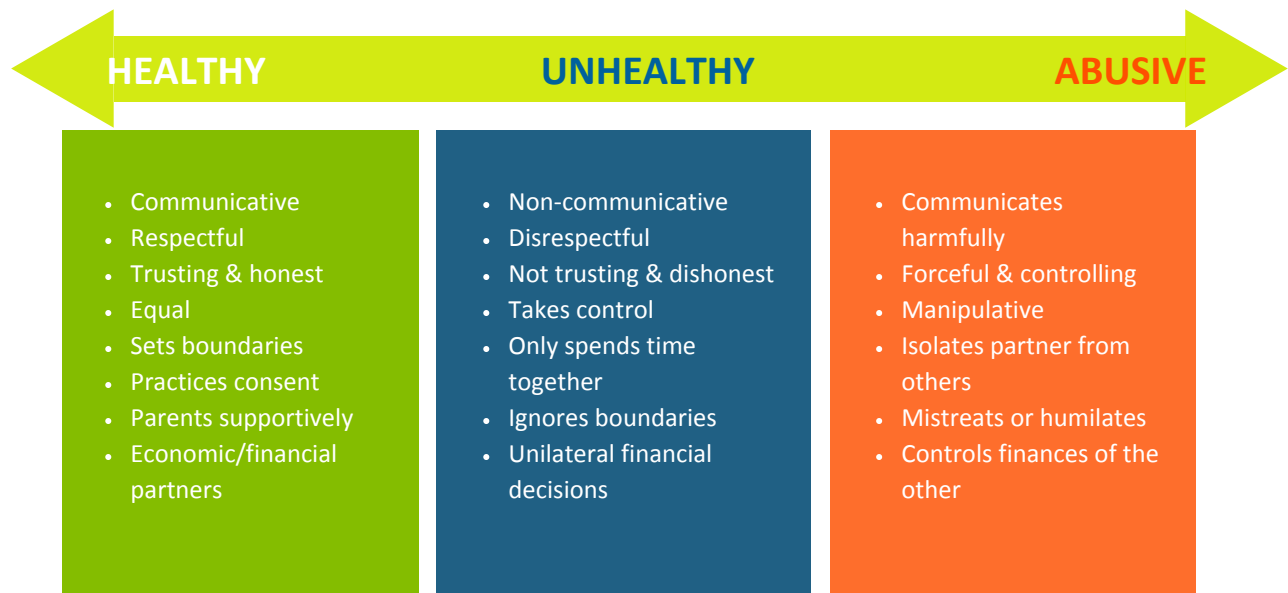
Respect

Partners treat each other in a way that honours their feelings, needs and rights.

Boundaries

Partners agree or set boundaries when necessary. Limits are mutually respected.

Foundation of Healthy Relationships

Trust

A physically and emotionally safe environment is created within the relationship.

Support

Partners encourage each other's interests & goals, and can rely on one another.

Independence

Each partner is their own individual and can spend time apart from one another.

Communication

Partners feel secure enough to respectfully disagree and share their feelings,

Adapted from *Healthy Child Manitoba and Canadian Red Cross* and *Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI).*

Unhealthy & Abusive Relationships

Unlike healthy relationships, an unhealthy relationship involves behaviours that leave individuals feeling insecure resulting in a lack of trust or communication in the relationship. Unhealthy behaviours can serve as warning signs for future abusive behaviours and harm your emotional, psychological and physical safety.

All relationships exist on a spectrum from healthy to abusive. The following can help you to determine where relationships in your life sit: [5]

HEALTHY	UNHEALTHY	ABUSIVE
• Communicative • Respectful • Trusting & honest • Equal • Sets boundaries • Practices consent • Parents supportively • Economic/financial partners	• Non-communicative • Disrespectful • Not trusting & dishonest • Takes control • Only spends time together • Ignores boundaries • Unilateral financial decisions	• Communicates harmfully • Forceful & controlling • Manipulative • Isolates partner from others • Mistreats or humilates • Controls finances of the other

Adapted from National Domestic Violence Hotline, Healthy Relationships.

Children & youth who have experienced violence report being harmed most often by a family member or acquaintance.[4]

Recognizing abusive behaviour and its warning signs can help you to build healthier relationships.

Often, people believe that harm or violence is more likely to be caused by strangers or individuals whom someone may share no relationship with.

However, evidence suggests that for children and youth who have experienced violence, they are less likely to be harmed by strangers and are most likely to be harmed by a family member or acquaintance. Prioritizing how each of us can build, strengthen and maintain healthy relationships will reduce the likelihood of taking part in or experiencing relationships with unhealthy and abusive behaviours.

Types of Relationships

When we think about relationships, people often focus on romantic connections. While these relationships can bring fulfillment to someone's life, other types of relationships are just as valuable to our emotional well-being.

In this section, we outline the most common relationships that may be present in an individual's lifetime. Not all of these relationships may currently exist in your life and some may dissolve over time; however, you will likely hold at least one of these relationships in the present moment. Please note that this list is not exhaustive and extends to other relationship types as well.

Peer

Romantic

Family

Community
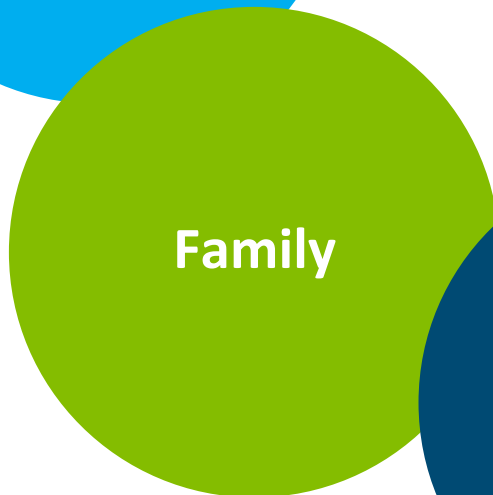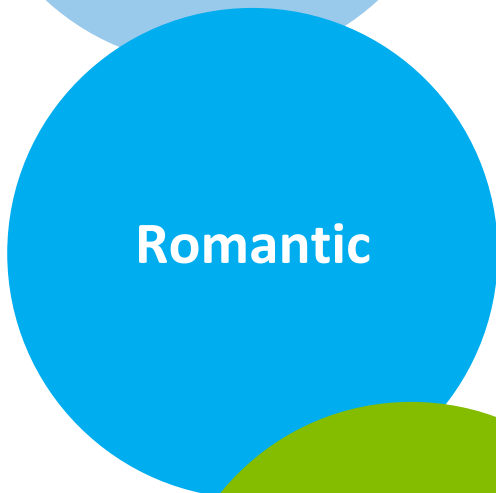
"**Connection is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard and valued.**"

- Brené Brown

PEER RELATIONSHIPS
Friends, Classmates,
Co-workers & Colleagues

Adolescence is typically the time where deep friendships emerge and peer connections are further developed. Research shows that these peer relationships play an increasingly important role in shaping and influencing one's behavior[6] The behaviours that are formed at this stage are then carried forward into adulthood and later life.

Having a clear understanding of how our decisions and behaviour can be influenced by our peers can better inform our choices for friends, partners and other relationships that we may experience in the future.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory explains that most human behavior is learned through observing, imitating and modelling the actions of others. When people observe the behavior of others, they learn how to behave in the same or similar ways. Therefore, the peers you surround yourself with can greatly influence your decision-making and impact your overall well-being. [7], [8]
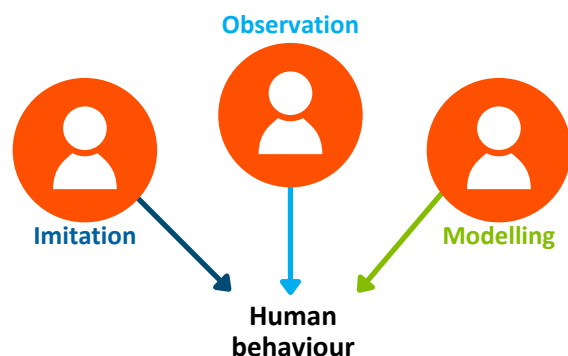
Influence of Social Media

Prevalence of social media use across age groups, in Canada:[8]

Ages 15 to 34		9 in 10
Ages 35 to 49		8 in 10
Ages 50 to 64		6 in 10
Ages 65+		1 in 3
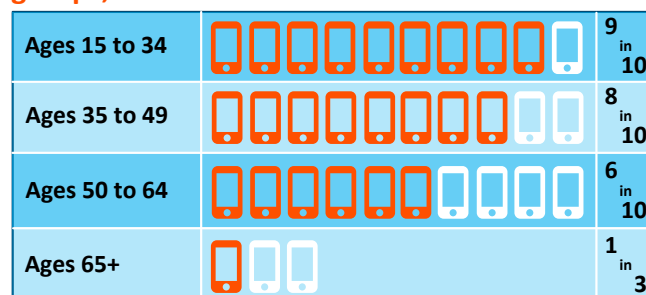
Adapted from Statistics Canada.

As the chart above suggests, social media plays a powerful role in influencing peer relationships across all age groups. Social media is an efficient tool for keeping in touch in long distance relationships, connecting with others on shared interests/activities, and facilitating scheduling and communication in and out of the workplace.

However, social media can also negatively impact our peer relationships by increasing risk for social isolation, poor mental health outcomes and cyberbullying. It is important to be mindful about how social media impacts you personally and how it may influence your peer relationships. Recall the foundations of a healthy relationship - how might your understanding of those characteristics be impacted by social media?
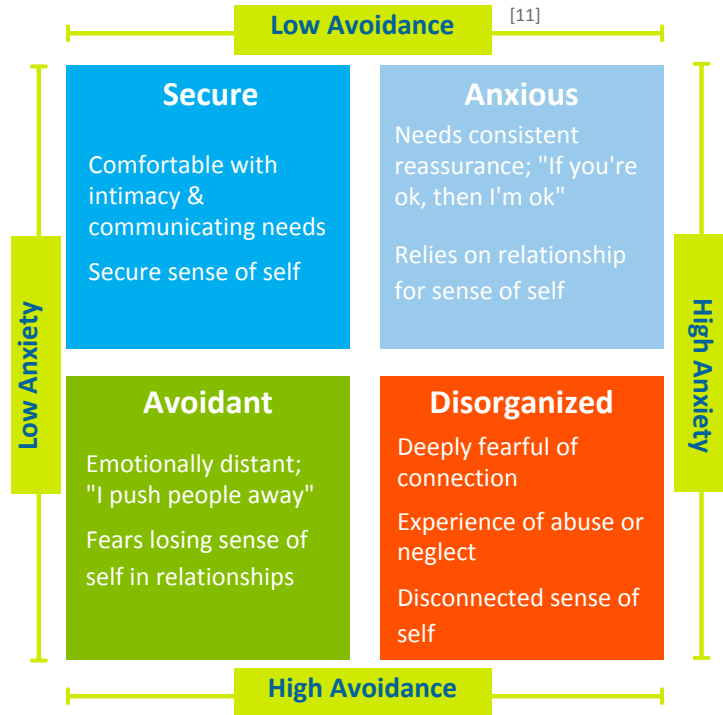
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Romantic relationships are defined as ongoing voluntary interactions between two individuals who are physically and emotionally attracted to one another. These types of relationship typically involve feelings of love, companionship and intimacy - and unlike peer relationships - a sexual component and an expectation of exclusivity.[9]

Attachment Theory [9], [10]

Attachment theory was created by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth to explain how people think, feel and behave in close relationships. They identified 4 key attachment patterns: Secure, Anxious, Avoidant, and Disorganized. Details about each pattern are outlined on the right.

Conflict in romantic relationships can occur when there are differences in attachment styles between partners or if one partner has a more insecure attachment style than the other. For this reason, having a deep understanding of your insecurities and building healthy coping skills will increase your well-being and help your relationships thrive.

[11]

Low Avoidance

Low Anxiety

Secure

Comfortable with intimacy & communicating needs

Secure sense of self

Anxious

Needs consistent reassurance; "If you're ok, then I'm ok"

Relies on relationship for sense of self

Avoidant

Emotionally distant; "I push people away"

Fears losing sense of self in relationships

Disorganized

Deeply fearful of connection

Experience of abuse or neglect

Disconnected sense of self

High Anxiety

High Avoidance

Adapted from Sarah Crosby "themindgeek".

The most recent data from 2016 states that 3 million Canadians aged 15 and older experienced psychological, physical and/or sexual violence within a dating relationship in the past 5 years. [12]

Online Dating & Potential Risks

The online dating scene in Canada has grown $6M per year since 2010, with 36% of Canadians using online dating as their main source of meeting people. While online platforms make it easier for people to connect and can increase the chances of finding a potential match - there is also risk for unhealthy and/or abusive relationships to develop in the form of cyber dating abuse. [13]

Ensuring your own safety and well-being is always the top priority when engaging in online dating. On the following page, feel free to use the 'Romantic Relationship Check-Up' list to determine the health of your current dating or romantic relationship.

Romantic Relationship CHECK-UP [14]

Reflect on your current dating/romantic relationships and respond to the statements outlined in the checklist below. Did you answer 'yes' to any of these statements? If so, you may be experiencing unhealthy or abusive behaviours in your relationship.

Please connect to social service professionals and resources in your community if you have been feeling unsafe or if you would like to learn more about how to shift away from unhealthy relationship patterns.

YES   NO   My partner demands to know where I am at all times. [14]

YES   NO   My partner threatens to hurt me or them when we don't agree.

YES   NO   My partner repeatedly pressures me to send sexual photos, videos, or messages.

YES   NO   My partner tells me who I am allowed or not allowed to see.

YES   NO   My partner shares my messages, pictures, or other media intended to be private without my consent.

YES   NO   My partner tells me what to wear or how to look.

YES   NO   My partner demands to check my phone, social media accounts, or email

YES   NO   My partner puts me down or criticizes me.

YES   NO   My partner texts, calls, or messages me online excessively.

YES   NO   My partner demands that I give them personal information (e.g. address, credit card information, etc.).

Adapted from Promoting Relationships & Eliminating Violence Network (PREV-net).

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In this section, we use the term 'family' to encompass children, parents, caregivers, close friends and extended family members who group together based on biological relations or shared lived experiences. A family may be biologically related to one another and could live together as a unit; however, this may not always be the case as families are diverse and come in all shapes and sizes.

Positive family relationships can help individuals flourish, while adverse family relationships can negatively impact well-being.

Family relationships have the biggest impact on an individual's life outcomes as they provide the foundation for development and the formation of healthy social relationships.

[15]

Fostering supportive relationships between family members can lead to healthier dynamics in the family unit, strengthen protective factors, and lessen risk factors within families. Examples of protective factors and risk factors include:
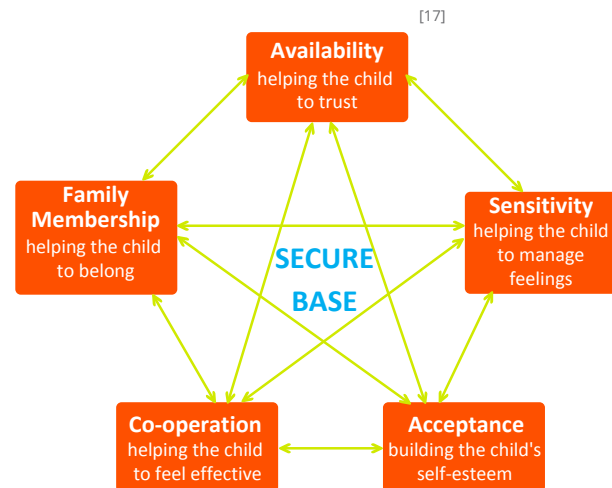
[16]

Protective Factors	> Strong and stable family relationships	> Consistency in routines and limits	> Supportive parenting > Strong family values
Risk Factors	> Family conflict and instability	> Lack of involvement with children	> Violence or abuse > Financial difficulties

Adapted from Be You.

The Secure-Base Model [17]

The Secure-Base Model draws from attachment theory and focuses on the impact of child-caregiver relationships to a child's secure base. When these relationships are positive and healthy, it develops a strong sense of security for a child - giving them the reassurance that they can confidently go out into the world.

The 5 dimensions of the model are explained in more detail below. Although this model centers on children, people of all ages need to rely on a secure base throughout their lifespan - especially as they encounter stressful situations.

[17]

Availability helping the child to trust

Family Membership helping the child to belong

Sensitivity helping the child to manage feelings

SECURE BASE

Co-operation helping the child to feel effective

Acceptance building the child's self-esteem

Adapted from University of East Anglia.

This secure base is initially formed in early childhood, and continues to develop through adolescence and adulthood as we form new relationships. When child-caregiver relationships are not supportive or stable, children will struggle to have a secure base and enter adulthood with challenges in forming positive relationships. Therefore, family relationships are key determining factors on the health and well-being of individuals.

COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

As individuals, we are shaped by our relationships – who we spend our time with – and our communities – where we spend our time. The communities each of us are brought up in play important roles in the relationships we form and the interests we hold – ultimately carving out our own identities as we grow from children to adults in society.

The Social-Ecological Model [18]

> ❝ **Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.** ❞
>
> - Helen Keller

When thinking about relationships at the community level, Urie Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model is key in illustrating the interactions that occur between ourselves and our wider community. It is important to understand that our social roles - how we view ourselves in larger society - is tied to our community relationships. Our participation in our community is dependent on how we define our community. Whether it may be through our ethnocultural identity, sports teams, neighborhoods, or workplaces.

Societal [18]

Community
Neighborhoods

Laws

Values

Relationship

Churches

Family
Partner ⟷ Peers
Friends

Individual

Health
Services

Coaches
Teachers

Schools

Workplaces

Social
& Cultural
Norms

Ideologies

Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

It is within these various communities that we begin to engage with its members and form relationships. The stage in life where our social relationships begin to extend beyond family, school and peers and into community is during adolescence.

Community relationships are an important part in the development of our individual/collective identities and our understanding of social norms and culture. [6]

Ways to Strengthen Relationships

How can we build strong and healthy relationships?

Now that we have explored each of the different types of relationships, let's discuss the ways in which we can strengthen the relationships we hold in our lives. Many are of the belief that disagreements and conflicts are signs of an unhealthy relationship when in fact, they are very normal and healthy. Disagreements and conflicts are inevitable, but it is how we deal with them that determines the health of our relationships. Using effective conflict resolution, communication, and coping skills will help us to build strong and healthy relationships in our communities.

It is important to note that as we discuss boundary setting and conflict resolution in relationships, this does not apply to cases of abuse. Abusive relationships are much more complex. The top priority is always ensuring physical and emotional safety for those impacted. If yourself, a loved one, or someone else you know is experiencing abuse, please connect with resources in your community for support.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS

Learning how to resolve conflicts in your relationships in a healthy way is a valuable skill that can be applied in various contexts. Whether you run into a problem with a friend or a co-worker, it is helpful to know how to resolve conflict in an effort to prevent the same issue from coming up again and again. It is also an excellent way to practice boundary setting and learn how to be assertive without being angry or defensive. [19]

Below are five useful tips that you can implement the next time you are faced with conflict in your relationships.

1 **Establish boundaries** [20]

State your boundaries - limits you set to protect your well-being.
We all deserve to be treated with respect and it is okay to tell someone 'no' or 'stop'. Always know that you can let the person know they are not respecting you or your boundaries.

2 **Find the real issue**

Getting to the root cause of an argument or problem helps to avoid assumptions being made about the other person's thoughts or feelings. Often, we may bring up other frustrations in an argument to mask the real underlying issues. Have an open and honest conversation with the other person to get deeper into the heart of the problem.

3 **Agree to disagree**

While there may be many things that you and your partner may agree with, it is unrealistic that you will agree on everything. In moments where you may disagree, determine whether this issue is worth having a conversation about or if you are able to let it go. If the problem is too important and you cannot agree to disagree, then a larger conversation may need to be happen surrounding your needs and compatibility.

4 **Compromise when possible**

It can be challenging to compromise in a relationship. However, taking turns compromising can make it easier as this gives each person the opportunity to make the decisions they want. Finding a middle ground is also helpful and can be achieved by each person sharing their wants and needs and coming to a reasonable outcome that satisfies both of you.

5 **Consider it all**

Overall, it is important consider all aspects of the relationship when experiencing conflict and to see whether compromise is appropriate for the issues being brought forward. If you notice that the problems being evaluated is leading either/both of you to compromise on your/their beliefs or morals, consider the other person's perspective and try to reflect on why they might be upset or frustrated. Contextualizing arguments will give each of you the space to express your feelings.

Adapted from Love is Respect.

HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

Healthy communication and boundary setting begins with effectively expressing our thoughts, feelings and needs. The following are some helpful tips and methods to practice healthy communication in your relationships.

The "I" Message Formula[21]

"I feel..."

Begin with naming the emotions you are experiencing.

Tip: Use an emotions wheel to identify the feeling.

"when..."

Next, describe the situation or specific behaviour that led to that emotion.

Tip: Focus on your experience rather than blaming or accusing.

"I feel frustrated when I am told over and over again to do my homework because I'm old enough now to complete it without reminders. I need to feel trusted that I'm capable of doing this on my own."

"because..."

Now connect the behaviour or situation to your emotion. Reflect on why you might be feeling that way.

Tip: Avoid placing blame or making judgements

"I need..."

End with sharing what you need in this situation or what you need from the other person.

Reminder: This connects to boundary setting .

Setting & Maintaining Boundaries

Boundary setting can be a challenging task in any relationship. However, it is important to define the limits you place for yourself and it is also a way to communicate your needs, goals, feelings and values. Boundaries can be emotional, physical or digital. We list some examples below: [22]

Emotional	"I want to spend time with my friends or family on weekends."	"I know you mean well, but please just listen without offering your opinion.
Physical	"I'm comfortable with some touching, but I'm not ready to have sex."	"If my child doesn't want a hug, you need to respect that."
Digital	"I'm cool with following each other on social media, but not with sharing passwords."	"I can't talk to you right now, but I will call you when I can."

Adapted from Love is Respect.

How to Set Boundaries [23]

1 **Be clear.**
Explain exactly what the boundary you're setting is. Be specific and feel free to ask if they need clarification.

2 **Set consequences.**
Identify consequences if boundary is not respected and ensure you are willing/able to follow through on them.

3 **Keep the focus on you.**
Avoid blaming/judging the other person when stating your boundary. The "I" Message Formula can be helpful here.

What if my boundaries aren't respected? [24]

If you are in a safe and healthy relationship, having open communication is critical when boundaries are overstepped or not respected by yourself or the other person. You can discuss the situation with them using "I" statements and talk about what steps each party can do moving forward to ensure the boundary is not crossed again. Remember that holding one another accountable is part of creating a healthy relationship.

If you are experiencing warning signs of unhealthy or abusive behavior in your relationships, having a conversation with your partner may not be a safe option for you. It is highly recommended to talk to someone in your support system, and contact a professional for help to discuss steps in creating a safety plan.

COPING SKILLS

Regulating ourselves in times of stress and/or heightened emotions is an important life skill. Having the ability to manage or change our reactions in distressing moments allows us to build autonomy over our own emotions instead of feeling ruled by them. By engaging in various types of sensory activities, we can learn more about our sensory system needs and how we can appropriately adapt our responses. [25]

Mindfulness & Meditation

Often, when we feel a strong emotion such as anger, we may project that through violence, yelling or aggression. Mindfulness teaches us to instead, observe our thoughts surrounding the anger - without getting caught up in them - and to tune into our bodily sensations when we feel that emotion.   By bringing our attention to how emotion unfolds in our body and understanding the steps in that process, we can dampen our reactions so that we can respond to situations in more productive and healthy ways. [26]

9-Minute Guided Meditation [27]

Guided meditations can be helpful when feeling stressed, overwhelmed or distracted and are just starting out with practicing mindfulness meditations.

Copy & paste the link to try:

https://www.mindful.org/a-meditation-to-focus-attention/

Meditation at Your Desk [28]

Whether at work or school, you can take a 15 minute break to meditate right at your desk.

Copy & paste the link to try:

https://www.mindful.org/meditate-at-your-desk/

Mindfulness Exercises for Kids [29]

Practicing mindfulness early in life can help promote healthy self-regulation skills for the future.

Copy & paste the link to try:

https://www.waterford.org/resources/mindfulnes-activities-for-kids/

Deep Breathing Exercises

Deep breathing exercises are a simple and effective way to calm your nervous system when feeling overwhelmed or stressed. There are numerous breathing exercises you can practice. An example of a Belly Breathing exercise is provided below.[30]
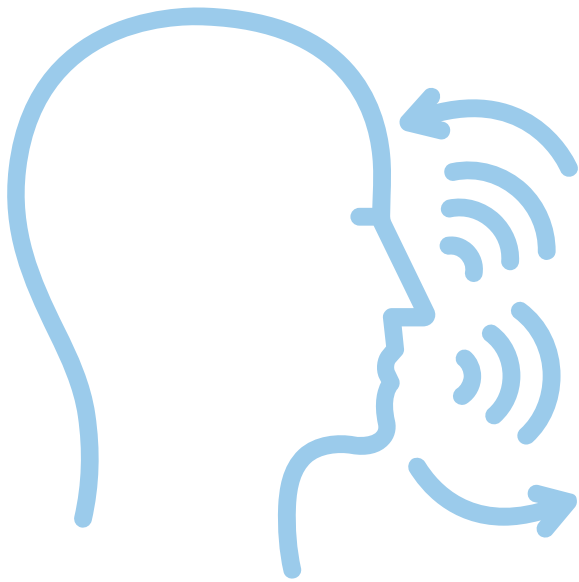
1 Sit or lie flat in a comfortable position.

2 Put one hand on your belly and the other hand on your chest.

3 Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out.

4 Breathe out through pursed lips - as if you were whistling. Feel the hand on your belly go up and down.

5 Repeat 3 to 10 more times. Take your time with each breath.

6 Notice how you feel when you complete the exercise.

Physical Activity

Physical exercise and activity can be another key coping mechanism to manage difficult or overwhelming emotions. There are a range of physical activities to choose from and the most important part is to do something that works best for you and your needs.

> **Sports - hitting a baseball, playing soccer, yoga, running, biking, etc.**

> **Walking or hiking**

> **Group fitness classes - Zumba, dancing, etc.**

> **Strength training or weight lifting**

Supporting Healthy Relationships

Supporting healthy relationships extends to all areas of a person's life. Offering ways in which different networks can best foster an environment that supports healthy and safe relationships will help to promote a culture of safety and meaningful connection. When we create a space where families, school/workplaces, and communities have the tools and resources to support healthy relationships, then the individuals in these environments can trust that their well-being is valued and prioritized.

It can be challenging to know where to begin when supporting healthy relationships. The following provides examples of what this can look like.

School & Workplace Support [31]

- Encourage discussion in the classroom by educating students on the impacts of abuse. Ask them how might violence affect their relationships and larger society?

- Help develop a safety plan by connecting students or employees to support groups or professionals that can help keep them safe.

- Be supportive and believe students or employees who are experiencing unhealthy or abusive relationships. Reassure them that their safety is your priority.

Family & Peer Support [16]

- Spend regular quality time together as a whole family and with each family member, even for only a few minutes a day.

- For parents, teach and model problem-solving skills to children and young people to build their confidence in resolving their own conflicts.

- Reach out to family, friends or professionals when struggling with juggling demands and know that there is strength in asking for help.

- Be an active listener when engaging with friends, partners or family and offer help to one another.

Community Support [6]

- Community involvement through volunteering can provide all members with a sense of purpose and enhance connections with other members.

- Leaders of different ethnocultural communities can offer families with links to services in the community in languages and environments that connect to their cultural roots.

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