University is a time when most students are in and out of a lot of relationships. Relationships can be a lot of fun (and a lot of work at times) if they are healthy, but can be our worst nightmare if they are unhealthy in nature, and can deeply affect our overall happiness. When relationships go bad and end, it is not unusual for each partner, particularly the one who didn’t decide to end the relationship, to feel sad and in some cases quite depressed. To reduce the likelihood of these negative outcomes, it is very important to understand what a healthy relationship looks like and how to increase the likelihood of having one. At the same time, it is important to be able to see the signs of an unhealthy relationship, so you know when to push for change, seek counselling, or end the relationship.

Let’s start by trying to distinguish healthy from unhealthy relationships, but it is important to say that probably no relationship is completely healthy or completely unhealthy. Instead, we can place the health of all relationships on a continuum, which makes decisions around our relationship status more difficult of course.

**Healthy Relationship Characteristics:**

1. Each partner is treated with respect, and each person’s needs are taken into account.
2. Trust and honesty are the basis of the relationship.
3. Communication is open and clear, and there is no fear around being honest.
4. You accept each other for who you are, without focusing on the need for change.
5. Conflicts happen, but can usually be resolved.
6. Decisions and responsibilities are shared equally.
7. You feel safe to share your feelings, fears and insecurities.
8. Support is mutual, and not conditional.
9. You have more good times in the relationship than bad.
10. You are interested in each other’s lives.
11. Compromise is possible, when needs conflict.
12. Issues are never settled with violence.
13. Outside friendships are not just accepted, but encouraged.
14. Independent activities are enjoyed, as are separate identities.
15. Sexual activities are never forced, cruel or performed due to manipulation.
16. Each partner takes responsibility for his or her actions.
17. You respect each other’s needs for some privacy.
18. There are many shared goals, beliefs, values, dreams and hopes for the future.
19. There is a high degree of interest in each other’s lives related to such things as academics, work, family, friends, health and the future.
20. You feel secure in the relationship and you are happy, both when you are together and alone.

Unhealthy Relationship Characteristics:

1. You experience pressure to change who you are to suit your partner.
2. You are unable to trust your partner because of their behavior.
3. There is fear around communicating your feelings or disagreeing with your partner.
4. Decisions are often unilateral and do not take into account your needs.
5. Support is limited and often conditional.
6. Your ability to act independently is restricted.
7. Control, manipulation, verbal abuse and criticisms are used to influence the other person.
8. Your self-esteem is negatively impacted by your interaction with your partner, rather than positively.
9. You feel like you are “settling” in the relationship because you are afraid to be alone.
10. There is always something in the relationship that needs to be fixed.
11. You are afraid of your partner’s temper.
12. Your partner tries to isolate you from your friends and family.
13. One or both partners are overly jealous or possessive.
14. Resources (money, food, home, car, etc.) are unequally distributed.
15. You feel pressure to quit activities you really enjoy.
16. Your sexual activities are forced or pressured.
17. Physical force (pushes, bites, kicks, chokes, grabs, slaps, punches, throwing objects, destroying property or threats of force) are used to control the other’s behavior or to prevent the other from leaving.
18. One of the partners feels like they can’t live without the other person and may threaten to do something drastic (i.e., commit suicide, harm the other person) if the relationship were to end.

19. Your partner neglects you by spending little time with you, or not listening to your opinions.

20. You are blamed for all the bad things, or negative events, in your partner’s life.

Strategies To Promote A Healthy Relationship

Now that you understand the difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship, let’s look at some of the things you can do to ensure that your intimate relationship is on the more healthy side. This includes:

1. **Don’t Expect Anyone Else To Be Responsible For Your Happiness**
   This task is yours and yours alone. If we try to get happiness through our relationship alone, we will be disappointed and it takes power out of our own hands. Our happiness can be enhanced by a healthy relationship, but we do not want to be dependent on the relationship for our well-being.

2. **Make Time For Your Relationship**
   Relationship experts today say that the biggest reason relationships are failing is that couples are too busy and are not spending enough quality time together. Take time to just talk about your lives, jobs, fears, goals and dreams for the future, relationship issues, triumphs, emotions generally or anything that is meaningful. Also, take time to share enjoyable activities, share hobbies or go on a date night to stimulate your lives and your relationship.

3. **Share Life Responsibilities**
   Studies also indicate that when responsibilities are shared equally between each partner, couples are far happier overall. If there isn’t an equal distribution of responsibility over time, anger and resentment will no doubt develop and this will come out in all kinds of unhelpful ways. These tasks include such things as household chores, childcare, paying bills or any other potential task. Fairness needs to prevail.

4. **Express Your Negative Feeling Assertively**
   Since conflict within a relationship is inevitable, we need to be able to express our feelings and needs in assertive ways. This will in turn help establish appropriate boundaries, heighten mutual respect and deepen the relationship. Avoid trying to change or control the other person by being critical, sulking, expressing anger, or giving someone the “silent treatment”, as this will create
a lot of resistance rather than a cooperative perspective. Instead, talking about your feelings, needs, beliefs or values in an open and honest manner, while respecting the other person, is most likely to lead to compromises or an agreement to disagree, and not adversely affect the relationship. Remember, as well, assertiveness has a non-verbal component, which can often be more powerful than what we actually say. Aggressive gestures will lead to alienation, regardless of our words.

5. Learn To Laugh Together
Since humor can be the best medicine for us on an individual level to combat stress, humor in the relationship can also be incredibly healthy for the relationship. This can involve such things as playful teasing, seeing the humor in how you relate during conflict, or enjoying funny television shows or movies you can watch together. Shared laughter can really create connection between partners and can balance out a lot of negativity. Be aware of your partner’s limits and if he/she is O.K. with how you use humor/teasing, as it may cross boundaries and may be hurtful.

6. Learn The Art Of Forgiveness
There will be times when we all need to practice forgiveness in our relationships, given that we or our partner will likely do something that offends the other. Forgiveness is very much a decision we make to let go, so the relationship can move on and be healthy. Without forgiveness, we will continue to accumulate issues over time and resentment and anger will only build with each perceived infraction. This, at the same time, doesn’t mean we will forgive everything, since some choices may be too significant to move beyond (i.e., being cheated on, habitual lying, abuse, etc.).

7. Allow Space In The Relationship
Although time together is essential for the relationship to flourish, some time apart is also important to develop our separate identity and interests. For each couple, this balance of alone time and time together will be different of course, and will need to be discussed and negotiated. The more we allow our partners this time, the more we can really enjoy our time together, because it gives us more appreciation for the connection and more things to talk about when we are together. No one person can possibly meet all our needs and it puts a lot of pressure on the relationship if this is what we expect.

8. Be Thoughtful In Expressing Your Love
After the initial honeymoon stage in a relationship, we can easily fall into a pattern where we take the other person in the relationship for granted in many respects. This of course can lead to a loss of connection and a longing to potentially repeat the honeymoon phase in a new relationship. To avoid this,
we need to continue to show our partner ongoing signs of our love, respect, and support. Research shows that these indicators don’t have to be huge, expensive, or time consuming. It can be the little things (i.e., thanking or complimenting them, doing an act of kindness, standing up for them, a loving touch, listening or just spending time together) that help our partner feel valued.

9. **Foster A Healthy And Respectful Sexual Connection**

One of the ways that we can build a loving connection in an intimate relationship is to foster a healthy sexual relationship. It is this connection that distinguishes an intimate relationship from all the other relationships we have, so it requires the most trust, honesty and respect. Healthy loving couples are able to talk about each other’s sexual needs in an open and caring manner, and respond to these in a way that there is a desire to meet the other’s needs, unless the activities fall outside our comfort zone. A healthy sexual relationship is consensual and requires time and interest to continue to make it more satisfying and passionate.

10. **Give Each Other Support**

What we all want (more than anything) in an intimate relationship is love and support, since the outside world and our own emotions can be difficult to manage at times. Support of course can involve many things, depending on our partner’s needs and the struggles they are faced with. It can mean just truly listening to someone when they face a problem, offering potential solutions if this what they are looking for, encouraging their interests, validating their feelings even if you don’t agree with them, being their cheerleader, boosting their confidence or self-worth, and sharing in some of their responsibilities.

11. **Act In A Way That Instills Trust**

Since trust is the basis for any close relationship, it is essential not to do anything to break your partner’s trust. This means avoiding any behaviors that would create doubt or suspicion in the relationship. This instead means communicating truthfully, keeping your promises, acting responsibly, and acting with integrity. It also means being faithful to your partner.

12. **Don’t Be Afraid Of Conflict**

Conflict is a normal and healthy part of an intimate relationship. Having conflict in a relationship isn’t a problem, it’s how we learn to resolve the conflict that is crucial. Healthy couples feel free to openly communicate their feelings and respect each other’s differing perspectives. Although negative emotions will come out, they find a way to validate the other’s perspective and
whenever possible find solutions and compromises. Healthy conflict resolution is a skill that we all need to learn.

13. **Realize That There Is No Such Thing As A Perfect Partner**

Perfection is rare in most domains of life and this is particularly true when it comes to relationships. The most that we can do is get the best match we can and to continue to date until we feel we have this match. This does mean however, learning to accept some of our partner’s shortcomings, since we all have them. Deciding how many shortcomings we accept and which are the “deal breakers” is the hard part. Try making a list of your partner’s positive and negative qualities and determine which of the negative qualities, if any, are deal breakers.

14. **Make Self-Care A Part Of Your Daily Existence**

Self-care refers to any attempts we make to ensure that our needs are being met, related to such things as a healthy diet, regular exercise, adequate sleep, and a life full of fun and meaningful activities. The more we take care of our own health, the more energy and focus we will be able to devote to our relationship. Anyone who is feeling burned out is much more likely to be irritable and difficult to live with. Self-care is not just a gift to ourselves, but also to our relationship.

15. **Expect That The Relationship Will Be Full Of Peaks And Valleys**

If we expect that our romantic/intimate relationship will be a constant state of bliss, we no doubt will be disappointed, and we are likely to give up on a relationship far too early. Even the best relationships have ups and downs, particularly as we go through different life transitions (i.e., marriage, childbirth, deaths in the family, new jobs, health issues, empty nest, aging, etc.). Expectations that are higher than reality result in discontentment.

16. **Avoid Making Assumptions Related To Your Partner**

Far too often we can assume we know what our partner is thinking or feeling, or what their intentions are, without directly checking it out with them. When in doubt, ask questions in a way that doesn’t raise their defenses and ask for clarification, rather than making accusations. Research indicates that many of our assumptions are actually wrong and are based on habitual ways of seeing the world, rather than based on reality.

17. **Choose Your Battles**

There are endless issues that can create conflict with our partners, so we need to be very careful what battles we choose to fight. If you feel like you can’t let anything go, then it is inevitable that a lot of conflict will fill your relationship.
Instead, healthy couples learn to judiciously decide whether the issue is important enough to bring up, and then they do so in a manner that is respectful and open to compromise. Learn to prioritize your concerns, since we want love rather than conflict to be the centre of our relationship.

18. **Use “I Statements” In Your Communication**

To try and enhance the likelihood that your partner will not get overly defensive when you discuss different issues, use “I Statements”, such as “I think…”, “I feel…”, “I prefer…”, which avoid potential blaming that would only incite an argument and bad feelings between you. It is always difficult to argue with how someone feels, compared to feeling attacked in some way. “I statements” create understanding, rather than more conflict.

19. **Practice Using Time-Outs To Control Your Anger**

Anger is a normal human emotion that will no doubt come up in all relationships, and can be expressed if done with respect. However, there are many times when one’s anger may be too intense to express in a healthy way. At these times, it can be helpful to use some form of time-out, where you physically leave the situation temporarily so as not to say or do something that you later would regret, or could destroy the relationship. Talk to your partner ahead of time however, so both of you are aware of the intention of the time-out and the length of it, so one or the other does not feel like you are just leaving or ignoring them. Sometimes a simple non-verbal cue (i.e., making a T with your two hands) to let them know you need to take a time-out will suffice. While you are on your time-out, do something distracting (like taking a walk) so you can let your physiological arousal calm down. Then, come back and finish the conversation at a pre-arranged time.

20. **Do Not Tolerate Any Abuse**

Healthy relationships have no room for any type of abuse and this is a red flag that you need to actively do something to end the abuse. Abuse, of course, can come in all kinds of forms including verbal, emotional, physical and sexual. Consider all options in addressing the abuse as soon as it occurs, including giving direct feedback, receiving or encouraging your partner to go for counselling, or leaving the relationship if change is not possible. Abuse of any kind has a big impact on self-esteem and the longer you wait to deal with it, the more your self-esteem and confidence will be impacted. Remember as well, that the abusive behavior is never your fault. It is the sole responsibility of the abuser.

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