

## **MODULE E BACKGROUND INFORMATION HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS**

### **Characteristics of a Healthy Relationship**

Healthy relationships are enjoyable and respectful and provide opportunities for many positive experiences that affect self-esteem. We can develop healthy relationships with anyone, including family, friends, and dating partners. It takes time, energy, and care to develop positive, healthy relationships. Relationships made during the teenage years can become very special and may form an important part of life. There are also many lessons to be learned from the relationships we have.

Healthy dating relationships should start with the same ingredients that healthy friendships have, such as effective communication, honesty, and respect. Dating relationships are a little different than other relationships, however, because they may include expressions of physical affection that may range from hugging, kissing, or holding hands to sexual intercourse.

All healthy relationships between two partners are characterized by communication, respect, sharing, and trust. They are based on the belief that both partners are equal and that decision making in the relationship is shared equally.

In healthy relationships, we must maintain the freedom to be ourselves. It is important to maintain an individual identity, regardless of the type of relationship being pursued.

Maintaining our identity in a romantic relationship also means nurturing the other relationships we already have with family and friends. At first, dating couples may want to spend all their time with each other, but it is equally important for couples to spend time apart so that they can maintain healthy relationships with other people. These relationships provide perspective, and can be a valuable source of support when a couple experiences difficult or stressful times in a romantic relationship or when the relationship ends.

A healthy relationship should be satisfying and promote individual growth. Establishing mutually acceptable boundaries based on personal values is important in any relationship. Romantic partners should never pressure each other to do things they have agreed not to do. Mutual respect means not only giving respect to a partner, but also showing respect for oneself.

## RELATIONSHIP CHARACTERISTICS\*

Some important characteristics of a healthy relationship are identified below.

### **Closeness**

- You are caring and loyal.
- You trust your partner.
- You share your feelings.
- You support your partner during illness or during stressful times.

### **Shared Goals and Beliefs**

- You share beliefs and values.
- You recognize and respect differences in each other.

### **Shared Experiences**

- You share common interests and friends/acquaintances.
- You talk about your experiences and accept and respect each other's individual interests.

### **Communication**

- You are honest with each other.
- You listen to each other.

### **Respect**

- You use respectful language and do not act in ways that demean your partner.
- You understand your partner's wishes and feelings.
- You are ready to compromise—to meet your partner halfway.

### **Humour**

- You and your partner enjoy being with each other and can laugh together.

### **Affection**

- You show your partner you care.
- You show each other affection in many ways.

\* Source: Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba, 2006. Adapted with permission.

## **Characteristics of an Unhealthy Relationship**

Relationships generally start out with good intentions. As relationships develop, disagreements and conflicts will arise. Conflict is not necessarily negative if we deal with it appropriately. How we deal with conflict is based on a given situation, as well as on previously learned behaviours.

In some conflict situations, people may use behaviours that are considered unhealthy or abusive, and may include the following:

- **Emotional:** making degrading comments, ignoring, isolating, controlling friendships and/or activities, threatening
- **Physical:** slapping, pushing, punching
- **Sexual:** unwanted touching, forced or coerced sex
- **Financial:** taking or withholding money, controlling spending

## Benefits of Healthy Relationships

Our psychological health and physical well-being depend heavily on our ability to form close relationships. The process of relationship building begins with our families, moves to the formation of friendships, and may eventually lead to romantic relationships. All these relationships help us to develop interpersonal skills and provide experiences that assist us in fine-tuning our emotions and feelings.

Our first relationships are with our parents or caregivers. When caregivers feed and nurture children, they provide a sense of security, trust, and belonging, thus forming a powerful mutual bond. Children who are benefiting from healthy, loving, and nurturing relationships will seek proximity or contact with their caregivers. As adults, these individuals will be more likely to trust other people, feeling secure that they won't be abandoned or rejected. This initial relationship with caregivers has implications on many of the relationships that will follow.

Children who do not experience a secure, healthy relationship in early childhood may become avoidant, resistant, or ambivalent toward their parents/caregivers. As adolescents and adults, these individuals may have a difficult time trusting friends and intimate partners, or letting people get too close for fear of being hurt or rejected.

One of the keys to creating a meaningful and special relationship for life is to affect someone positively at an emotional level. Caring about someone, particularly at a time of need, learning to have faith and trust in others and ourselves, and sharing ourselves with others are some ways to build healthy relationships and to bring about positive outcomes, which will enrich our lives and the lives of others.

## Factors Affecting Relationships

In all relationships, people experience times of difficulty. Problems often arise because the people in the relationships have different expectations, become distracted with other issues, or have difficulty expressing what is on their minds. Some of the issues or concerns are controllable, while others are, or are perceived to be, uncontrollable. Common problems exist in most relationships and, if they remain unresolved, can lead to a break-up.

Examples of issues encountered in the common problem areas in relationships are listed below.

<b>Practical/Logistical Issues</b>	<b>Compatibility Issues</b>	<b>Commitment Issues</b>	<b>Affection/Intimacy Issues</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Physical distance from partner</li><li>▪ Financial issues</li><li>▪ Family issues (e.g., family acceptance)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Age/maturity</li><li>▪ Values or beliefs</li><li>▪ Personal character and attitude</li><li>▪ Personal goals</li><li>▪ Culture and language</li><li>▪ Religion</li><li>▪ Intellect</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Too busy with other activities/people</li><li>▪ Unsupportive of partner's needs, goals, activities</li><li>▪ Issues of infidelity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Communication issues</li><li>▪ Power and control</li><li>▪ Attraction issues</li><li>▪ Mental-emotional issues (e.g., low self-esteem, jealousy)</li><li>▪ Behaviours associated with demonstrating affection/intimacy</li><li>▪ Emotional or physical abuse</li></ul>

## Communication: The Cornerstone to Healthy Relationships

A relationship does not exist without communication. A *healthy relationship* does not exist without effective communication. Through effective communication we create the characteristics of healthy relationships, such as trust, openness, and intimacy. We need effective communication to resolve conflicts, solve problems, and make decisions that contribute to the strength of a relationship. While patterns of communication may vary according to our personal style and family and cultural background, being able to express our values, opinions, feelings, and dreams is important in any meaningful relationship.

Everything we know about ourselves and others can only be processed through some form of communication. Effective communication is a shared responsibility that involves both sending and receiving messages. Strategies for effective communication involve verbal skills, active listening, and the ability to resolve problems or issues.

Communication in relationships is one of the most complex and strategic activities of human beings. It often takes place at an emotional level as we disclose our likes and dislikes, our opinions and suggestions, and our wants and needs. This intimate form of communication is best done face to face when each person is able to use the full range of verbal and non-verbal nuances of communication so that a message is delivered clearly and received without misunderstandings.

We traditionally establish our communication skills by observing and imitating others around us. It is, therefore, important to provide students with many opportunities to practise effective communication strategies.

## Technological Means of Communication

We are living in an age that places great importance on communication. Never before has communication been as prolific or as fast as it is today. Advances in the way we communicate are being made daily through technology that involves computers, the Internet, satellites, and more. The methods of communication now available through technology include wired, wireless, and mobile voice messaging, text messaging, email, and a variety of Internet options (e.g., chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs, personal web pages).

All methods of communication serve a purpose, but each method still requires the same considerations of trust, respect, and kindness. It becomes increasingly difficult, in the many forms of modern communication, to convey emotional messages when the subtle shades of meaning expressed through verbal and non-verbal communication are not present. What we say is important in any meaningful relationship, but how we say something is also a vital part of the message. In fact, much of what we say is “heard” through non-verbal means of communication (e.g., body language, tone, pitch, emotion).

### ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

A message is constructed of the following elements (Meade):

- **Words** (what you say) account for 7% of the message.
- **Voice and tone** (e.g., pitch, volume) account for 38% of the message.
- **Body language** (e.g., posture, facial expression, proximity) accounts for 55% of the message.

Forming and building relationships by technological means is not without its risks and dangers. Conversing with someone via email or text messaging has left many people wondering exactly how a message was meant and has resulted in critical misunderstandings and conflict. Connecting and building a relationship with someone on the Internet, where anonymity and pretence are pervasive, has led to many unfortunate and **life-threatening situations**.

### **Steps to Loving Communication\***

The following steps are ways to ensure healthy communication that is open, trusting, and reciprocal:

1. **Have reasonable expectations.** Keep in mind that partners are not mind readers. Tell each other what you mean. There will be times when you disagree.
2. **Know your own feelings.** If you feel unhappy or uncomfortable, take time to think about how you really feel and why, so you can do something about it.
3. **Recognize and correct communication-blocking habits.** Try not to generalize with "Never" or "Always" statements. Work at not belittling someone who disagrees with you.
4. **Think before you speak.** Take a deep breath so you have time to think about what you want to say and can say it with care. Focus on the behaviour or issue and not the person. Use respectful language.
5. **Allow the other person to save face.** Don't embarrass your partner in public by arguing or putting him or her on the defensive in front of friends.
6. **Use assertive communication.** Use assertive language, such as "I" statements (e.g., I feel frustrated when you are late).
7. **Decide what is negotiable and what is not.** Know where and when to compromise and when to let well enough alone.
8. **Make time for communication.** Your relationship deserves time, so make time to be together and just talk to each other.
9. **Learn to listen.** Don't jump to conclusions.
10. **Give each other compliments and positive comments.** It's sometimes harder to say something to show you care than to argue.

### **Styles of Communication**

Just as there are various modes of communication, there are also different styles of communication. The following represent four common styles of communication:

- **Passive-passive communication** is viewed as non-participatory. There is very little interaction. Passive communicators are seen as shy and withdrawn. They would much rather "go with the flow" than face a confrontation.
- **Passive-aggressive communication** is viewed as manipulative. Passive-aggressive communicators may seem to agree to avoid confrontation (passive) but will manipulate others to say things for them or say things behind someone's back (aggressive).

- **Aggressive-aggressive communication** is viewed as controlling. Aggressive communicators will take control and dominate conversations. In order to “win,” aggressive communicators feel they need to put others down to protect themselves.
- **Assertive-assertive communication** is viewed as open and honest. Assertive communicators are respectful and turn potential win-lose situations into win-win or win-learn situations. Assertive communicators will be direct, use “I” statements, and be sensitive to others. Assertive communication is seen as the most effective style of communication.

## Rights and Responsibilities in Healthy Relationships

### What Is a Right?

A *right* is an entitlement to perform or not to perform certain actions, either legally or morally. With each right that a person possesses, there is a corresponding duty or responsibility. For example, vehicle drivers have the right to drive on public roads and the responsibility to follow the laws and rules of the road to ensure their own safety and the safety of those around them.

A person can claim or assert many rights, such as the right to exist, to be loved, to be cared for, to have access to food, water, and shelter, to a secure environment, to freedom of choice, to feel proud of own actions, to privacy, to an education, to fair and equal treatment, and so on. Some rights are determined by law (e.g., age for alcohol consumption), some are conditional (e.g., free speech balanced with freedom from discrimination), and some can become limited or restricted (e.g., enforcement of curfews).

#### FEDERAL LEGISLATION

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* sets out rights and freedoms that Canadians believe are necessary in a free and democratic society. It establishes equality rights before and under the law and states, in part, the following:

##### *Guarantee of Rights and Freedoms*

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

##### *Equality Rights*

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

## **A PERSONAL BILL OF RIGHTS\***

- I have the right to be respected; and I will respect others.
- I have the right to make decisions that fit my values.
- I have the right to affection without having to have sex.
- If I do not want physical closeness, I have a right to say "no."
- I have the right to start a relationship slowly, before I become involved.
- When a relationship is ending, I will not change myself to try to keep it going.
- I have the right to ask for change in a relationship.
- I have the right to postpone pregnancy until I am truly ready to be a parent.
- I have the right to stay safe from sexually transmitted infections.
- I have the right to get a good education.
- I have the right to plan my future.
- I have the right to change my goals.

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\* Source: PPM 1998; rev. Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba, 2008. Adapted with permission.

## **Responsibility in Relationships**

*Responsibility* is having a duty and being accountable for one's actions. Responsible people do what needs to be done, fulfill their obligations, are answerable for their actions, use good judgment, and don't let people down. Being responsible, therefore, involves values such as trust and reliability.

When we are in a relationship with another person we have a responsibility to look after one another. If we neglect to perform these responsibilities, the relationship may become unhealthy. In some cases, relationships may become unsafe.

Each person in a relationship has the following responsibilities:

- Accept the other person as an individual and treat each other with kindness and caring. Any form of abuse in a relationship is unacceptable.
- Respect and value each other's rights.
- Discuss all aspects of the relationship, including sexual health (e.g., sexual history, testing for sexually transmitted infections, risks, contraception), and share in the decisions and resulting actions.
- Listen actively and validate and support each other's feelings.
- Honour the mutually agreed upon decisions and choices.
- Make, and allow each other to make, personal choices and decisions.
- Dignify the relationship by never pressuring each other to do things that either person is not comfortable doing, including any sexual activity.

## Consent to Sexual Activity

In addition to recognizing rights and responsibilities in relationships, students need to understand what consent means and how it is given within a healthy sexual relationship. Ensuring active, informed, and freely given consent is a vital factor in healthy sexual relationships.

Unless a person actively says “yes” to an intimate/romantic/sexual act, the partner is not permitted physical contact: “The law in Canada states that only ‘yes means yes’ and everything else means NO” (Klinic 15).

In 2008, Canada’s “age of consent” laws raised the age of consent from 14 years old to 16 years old. These laws were changed to provide children with further protection from sexual exploitation.

### C O N S E N T \*

- Consent is **active**, not passive.
- Consent is based on **choice**.
- Consent is **not manipulated**.
- Consent is **not coerced**.
- Consent is **not submission** due to fear.
- Consent is **freely given**.

\* Source: Canadian Red Cross. “What’s Love Got to Do with It? Everyone Deserves a Healthy Relationship.” *RespectED: Violence and Abuse Prevention*. PowerPoint presentation. Slide 15. 2008. Reproduced with permission.

## Unhealthy and Abusive Relationships

### Early Warning Signs of Abuse

Any relationship in which the responsibilities are not being met can develop into an unhealthy relationship. If the conflicts that arise are not mutually resolved, they may lead to unacceptable behaviours, which may be considered abusive.

Abuse in a relationship can be emotional, physical, sexual, or financial (as discussed in Module E, Lesson 1). Anyone, regardless of his or her background, can be abusive, and both males and females can be abused. Emotional abuse (e.g., making degrading comments, isolating) is often a warning sign of escalating abuse. In some cases, physical abuse does not start until much later in a relationship, but early warning signs are usually evident. Being aware of warning signs during the dating process is especially important.

## **Breaking Up**

Beginning and ending relationships is a part of life that we all experience. Some relationships do come to an end or have to be terminated. Sometimes relationships simply fade away because the people in the relationships develop new goals or new interests. Some relationships, however, develop conflicts that result in irreconcilable differences and sometimes even result in abusive situations, as examined in the *Relation Shifts* case study.

Ending a relationship is never easy. Even when a relationship is abusive, deciding to end it may be difficult, and it is certainly normal to feel nervous and sad about doing it. If it is determined that a relationship must end, there are appropriate ways to do this.

## **Community Supports and Services**

### **When There's a Need**

When things go wrong in a relationship, the resulting tension and stress can become overwhelming. Most situations leading to conflicts in relationships can be resolved by using the assertive communication strategies addressed in Lessons 1 and 3 of Module E. In extreme cases, partners may come to a point in their relationship when they are unable to resolve the issues leading to serious conflicts. When this happens, it may be sensible to seek outside help to save the relationship. Ideally, partners should make a mutual decision to seek help when a relationship is hurting; however, if one partner is not willing to seek help, this should not preclude the other partner from doing so. It is important that both partners agree to look for solutions to the relationship problems by understanding the reasons for them.

Many community supports and services exist for people who need to talk to someone about issues related to personal health and relationships. Couples may obtain assistance from school counsellors, family members, members of their religious community, or close friends who can provide new perspectives on the problems and help them to recognize possible solutions. Getting advice from others who have nurtured long-standing relationships themselves is sensible, as they may have experienced similar issues in the past. The wrong advice from inexperienced sources can, however, result in a destroyed relationship, so individuals need to take care in deciding from whom they will take advice.

Deciding to seek professional help from a guidance counsellor or a relationship counsellor is often a good choice. A counsellor will teach both partners better communication skills, as well as identifying different methods of handling similar problems and situations that may arise in the future.

Seeking professional help and support can mean the difference between saving a relationship and allowing it to end with malice and spite. By repairing a troubled relationship, couples are also able to help others if they come for advice. A couple that has sought professional help may be able to provide solid advice and guidance to others facing similar problems.

## **Sources of Support**

Various professional and community supports are available to assist people in dealing with relationships and sexual/reproductive health care. Some of the possible supports and services are listed below:

- school counsellor, advisor, teacher, Elder
- school clinic or public health office
- community health clinics (e.g., Health Action Centre, Klinik Community Health Centre, Mount Carmel Clinic)
- teen clinics (e.g., Youville Centre, Ndinawe Youth Resource Centre, Access Transcona Teen Clinic)
- supportive phone lines (e.g., Kids Help Phone, Klinik Crisis Line, Teen Touch)
- community or private counsellors
- peer support groups
- psychologists
- Child and Family Services

## **Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality**

While many supports and services are available, there are also barriers to accessing them. Individuals need to be aware that they have rights to protection of their medical and personal information.

*The Personal Health Information Act* was enacted by the Manitoba government in 1997 to protect people's privacy and confidentiality so that they would not be afraid to seek health care or to share personal information. Teens do not need anyone's permission to access medical care, including sexual and reproductive health care.