

Healthy Relationships

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre Resource



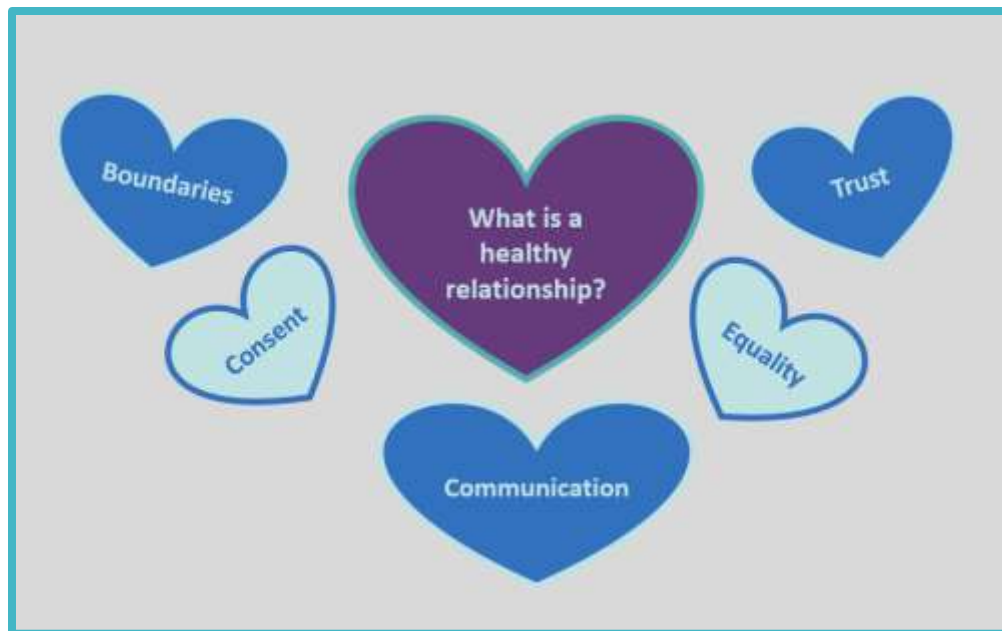
What is a healthy relationship?

Relationships are an important part of our everyday life and well-being. Whether with family, friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, partners or pets, a healthy relationship can boost our mental health, improve our self-esteem, and provide crucial support when times get tough.

But an unhealthy relationship can have the opposite effect and can leave us feeling anxious, scared, isolated, and confused.

All relationships will have their challenges, but these can be overcome with open communication and mutual respect.

Your relationship should help you feel confident, secure, respected and trusted. You should be able to voice what you want and need – as well as what's not right for you – and feel like you are listened to and that your choices are respected. If that's not the case, it might be time to leave.



Factors in a healthy relationship

Communication

Open communication is one of the key features of a healthy relationship. You should feel comfortable talking about anything from everyday life to concerns about health, finances, work, school, family or friends. You should be able to express how you feel, whether happy or sad, and feel like your partner is listening to you **without judgement**. You don't always have to agree, but you should feel that your choices and opinions are respected, and vice versa.

Consent

Consent is when we **freely and voluntarily** agree to engage in sexual activity. It's about our communication of "yes" and "no" and our partner listening to and respecting our wishes. If we feel pressured to do something we don't want to, or are unsure about, then it's not consent.

Consent is a clear and resounding "YES!" Just because someone doesn't say "no", doesn't mean they have given consent. If your partner goes silent or does not respond to your touch, then they are not consenting to sex and should not be pressured to do so.

Consent **can be verbal or non-verbal**, but it is an **ongoing process** – this means regular checking in on what you both want. At any point, you both have the right to change your mind.

To check if your partner consents, ask them: "Is this ok?" "Does this feel good?" "Do you want to continue?" This can help set the mood and increase the intimacy and enjoyment for everyone.

Being true to yourself

Sometimes we feel pressured to behave a certain way, or to do things we don't want to because we think that's what's expected of us. We look at celebs on TV, influencers on social media, or actors in pornography and think that we should be more like them, have a similarly "perfect" relationship, or perform sex the way they do.

But in a healthy relationship, **you don't have to act a certain way to make the other person happy**: you can relax knowing that they accept you for who you are. **The relationship develops at a pace that suits both of you** – you are not forced into anything that you are uncomfortable with and your self-esteem is not dependent on their approval. You care for each other, but **still invest time in your own interests and friendships** outside of the relationship.

Signs of an unhealthy relationship

- ▶ **Jealousy and controlling behaviour:** If your partner tries to control what you do, who you see or meet, and/or what you wear, it's a sign of an unhealthy relationship. In a healthy relationship, you are still able to live your own independent life. Your friends, family, hobbies and interests are vitally important and you should never be made to feel guilty for maintaining them, or feel pressured to ignore them.
- ▶ **Criticising and belittling:** There's nothing wrong with your partner expressing concern about something that is worrying them, but if they are constantly criticising you, making you feel bad about yourself or saying hurtful things, it can have a detrimental impact on your self-esteem. You might find yourself working extra hard in the relationship or doing things you're not fully comfortable with just to make your partner happy. **A healthy relationship should help you feel loved, confident and secure; never anxious, scared or needy.**
- ▶ **Intensity:** Healthy relationships move at a pace that everyone is comfortable with. But sometimes a person might come on very strong, pressurize you to commit, or love-bomb you with extravagant gifts and declarations of love. This type of **intense behaviour can feel overwhelming and can be a form of manipulation and control.**
- ▶ **Volatility:** There is conflict in every relationship, but some couples swing from fighting one day to being totally loved up the next, and the underlying issues are never really addressed. **Conflict should be resolved through open communication.** You don't have to agree with everything the other says or does, but **if you are constantly arguing and then making up, it can be a sign of an unhealthy relationship.**

How do I establish healthy boundaries?

Regardless of your relationship status, it's useful to think about what "healthy" looks and feels like to you. One way to do this is to consider what your personal boundaries are. Our boundaries are our personal limits – they can be physical, sexual, emotional, mental, material, and cultural. Setting and asserting boundaries for yourself, while also respecting the boundaries of others, can help everyone to feel more confident and secure in the relationship.

- ▶ **How comfortable are you with saying 'no'?** Being able to say 'no' without feeling guilty is a sign of a healthy boundary. Whether you say no to a friend asking you out, to a parent asking you to visit, or to a partner asking for sex, you never need to offer excuses or to feel bad for asserting and prioritising yourself.
- ▶ **How happy are you when you say 'yes'?** Sometimes we say 'yes' to things that we don't feel fully comfortable with; we might be afraid to say no, or maybe we don't want to

hurt the other's feelings. But this puts the other's needs before our own, and disregards our own personal boundaries.

- ▶ **How much responsibility do you take for others feelings?** When we take responsibility for other people's feelings, we end up sacrificing our own needs and wants. Maybe we want to make them happy, or we don't want to disappoint them. But trying to please others in this way, means our own boundaries get trampled on. We don't have to say "yes" to make another person happy, and we can say "no" without feeling guilty. Being able to do so is a sign of healthy boundaries.

What should I do if I'm concerned about my relationship?

If you are worried about your relationship, talk to someone you can trust: a friend, a parent, or a therapist about your concerns. Below is a list of organisations providing non-judgemental and confidential support, as well as information on safe sex and healthy relationships.

- ▶ **BeLonGTo** provides support to young LGBTI+ people through advice, youth groups, training and workshops, and counselling services. Visit: www.belongto.org.
 - ▶ **Dublin Rape Crisis Centre** hosts the National Confidential Helpline for anyone affected by sexual violence, including those who are supporting others. Tel: **1800 77 88 88**.
 - ▶ **Jigsaw** supports young people's mental health; from 1:1 online chat, to group chats, to in-person counselling. Visit www.jigsaw.ie to find out more.
 - ▶ **Men's Aid** hosts the National Confidential Helpline for men who are experiencing domestic abuse and coercive control. Tel: **01 554 3811**.
 - ▶ **SpunOut** is a youth information website that provides material about sex, relationships, gender identity, sexual orientation, mental health, and much more: see www.spunout.ie
 - ▶ **Safe Ireland** represents services & refuges around Ireland that support women & children seeking to escape domestic abuse & coercive control. Visit: www.safeireland.ie
- Women's Aid** hosts the National Freephone Helpline for women who are being abused by current or former boyfriends, partners or husbands - Tel: **1800 341 900**.

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is there for anyone affected by sexual violence, including those supporting others. Call the **National 24-Hour Helpline 1800 77 8888** for non-judgemental information & support.

DRCC also offers **specialised training** on issues like secondary/vicarious trauma, sexual consent & healthy relationships – contact our Education Department for more at etadmin@rcc.ie or 01-661 4911 or check out www.drcc.ie.

Disclaimer: This resource is provided for general information only and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice or counselling. **Issued Jan 2022**

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