

Relationships and sexual problems

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Healthy relationships

Relationships - whether family or intimate relationships with a partner - can be a great source of love, pleasure, support and excitement. However, they can also be a source of grief and anguish if they go wrong. The issue is made more relevant for students by the fact that most people in a university are in a period of personal change, which can make them feel less sure of what they want or how they can expect others to react.

Research into what makes relationships work successfully - whether family relationships, friendships or partnerships - tend to come up with the same few things:

Acceptance of difference

People in successful relationships do not try to force the others to be exactly like them; they work to accept difference even when this difference is profound.

Capacity for boundaries

People are aware that there is a point where they stop, and the other person begins. Sadly, it is unrealistic to expect others to solve all our problems or meet all our needs - even though we may hope for this at times.

Operating mainly in the present

Once relationships either focus on repeatedly picking over past events, or else are based only on the hope that things will be better tomorrow, they tend to go off the rails.

Respect for individual choice

It is accepted that each person has the right to decide their own direction in life: the relationship then adapts to follow this.

Skill in negotiating

Once each individual has decided what they want, the couple or family are able to work out a way to fulfil these different goals without anyone having to compromise totally.

Sharing positive feelings

In a couple these may be sexual intimacy; however, it can also just be pleasantness and kindness, as it is in a family.

Relationship problems often arise not because we never learned what to do, but because we have lost touch with this instinctive good sense and become overanxious about our relationships.

This may be because we have lost our own self-respect and sense of our personal worth; it may be because we are in personal distress and so putting too much pressure on our relationships; it may be because we have had unfortunate experiences in past relationships and so have temporarily lost our ability to trust.

We may have been out of touch with our ability to make successful relationships for so long that we may doubt if we ever had it. However, most people seem able to recover these skills if they put their mind to it.

Much work on improving a relationship can start with the individual. If one person is clear and reasoned about what they want and more consistent about how they ask for it, the whole relationship can begin to be put on a different basis.

Dealing with problems in your family

Family problems can be difficult to get a handle on as there might be a lot of people involved. Also, most of us are not used to looking at our families objectively - we tend to think they are just our family and that is how it is. However, a bit of reflection and analysis can take the heat out of a lot of difficult situations.

1. Try and think objectively about what you are trying to achieve.

Give yourself the benefit of any doubt and attribute the best motives to your behaviour. Get together all the examples you can of where the plan has worked for others etc. Maybe get a friend to help you. You don't have to write it down, just think it through. If at this point you realise that you're doing the wrong thing, you might want to make a strategic withdrawal! However, let's assume you end up convinced you know what you are doing, and you have a bit of evidence to back this up.

2. Think about why your family is disagreeing with you.

There is probably more than one reason. Maybe they don't understand your plan; maybe they had a course of action decided for you; maybe they have some worries and anxieties of their own. Make a real effort to think yourself into their shoes even though their behaviour may be very frustrating to you. Imagine discussing the question with them - think of what you might say and how they might reply. When you've thought of what might be worrying them, think creatively of ways to reassure them. If it helps, make a list of their worries and reassurances.

3. Find some way of discussing it.

That's easy if your family are talkers, but many families aren't. However, you can still find an opportunity to calmly mention your plans, to give a few examples of others who have done the same, to reassure their fears and sympathise with their disappointment. You may have to drop your points into the conversation over a time. Don't expect a miracle - people rarely change their opinion overnight. Don't feel you have to have total agreement; stop the discussion while the going is still good and come back to it a few days later. If they see you're serious and that some of their worries have been considered they will probably be a bit more agreeable the next time.

This is obviously a very simple example, but a similar approach can help in many situations. Frequently the conflict can be the other way around; many families find a son or daughter leaving for university is the catalyst for them to make changes.

Sometimes it can be impossible to find agreement. If you are interested in discussing the situation further or if you find you can't use the techniques described in this simple example - maybe the problem is too complex; you find it too upsetting; someone is too entrenched - counselling with the University Counselling Service may help you to clarify what is going on and to find a way to deal with it.

Dealing with problems in your personal relationships

Large books and lengthy courses have been created to explore the infinite complexity of human relationships. Problems can arise from many sources and it can frequently need some care to help disentangle the mixture of influences. These problems can be intensified by the pressures from others to form or end a relationship and the general pressures from the media which give an idealised view of couples which is often at odds with the reality many people experience.

Here are some simple guidelines to help you explore and resolve tensions which you may be feeling about relationships.

Do you know what you are looking for in a relationship?

There are many different reasons for entering a relationship - for companionship; for sexual experience; to have a long-term partner; to create a family and so on. Do you know what you are looking for? Have you discussed this with your partner? If not, there is a distinct possibility that you may both end up seriously at cross-purposes.

Are you asking too much or expecting too little from your relationship?

A good relationship can provide support, sexual expression, companionship and eventually an opportunity to build a joint life. If you are looking for it to provide more than this - for example to give you a sense of purpose and worth or protect you from some deep personal fear - you may be trying to get a partner to provide things that in fact only you can achieve. If, on the other hand, a relationship brings you continual grief and unhappiness you may be accepting for yourself a far lower level of interaction than you have a right to expect. In particular, no-one deserves to be on the receiving end of physical or sexual violence. Do look for the support you need to change or end a relationship if abuse is happening to you.

Have you got a model for the relationship you are trying to build?

Many people find it helpful to picture a relationship that they admire and to which they wish to aspire. It may be the relationship of someone you know or a fictional one. Consider how the people in this relationship resolve differences and difficulties. If it is not obvious and the relationship is a real one, ask them. If they have never been seen to have any problems, maybe they are not a terribly realistic model after all! Finding such a model can be a particularly difficult and important task for LGBT+ couples.

Can you talk about problems?

In all relationships there are going to be times of serious disagreement, where a conflict of interests must be resolved. This doesn't mean there is something wrong with the relationship. However, arguing the point out and reaching agreement does take a bit of skill and practice. Many relationship counsellors suggest the best way to resolve a relationship problem is to speak for up to fifteen minutes about your view of the problem. The other person listens carefully, interrupting only to clarify and to help you express yourself clearly. Then you swap over and the other person takes a similar time to explain their point of view. Finally take half-an-hour to talk together to see if you can resolve the difference. If you don't succeed this time, return to the problem a few days later and try again.

If you are not in the habit of talking in your relationship, it might be interesting to give it a try. Relationships are one of the curious features of human existence and can be well worth exploring.

Golden rules for arguing constructively

Do:

- Listen to the other person and show them you want to understand.
- Know why you are arguing before you start.
- Devote some time to resolving the problem - compromises?
- Sit down and make eye contact.
- Speak personally about what you feel.
- Acknowledge when the other person makes a valid point.
- Agree to differ if you cannot agree.
- Stick to the matter in hand.
- Cease arguing and separate if there is any likelihood of violence.

Try not to:

- Behave aggressively or disrespectfully.
- Argue deliberately to hurt the other person's feelings.
- Generalise.
- Bring up old unresolved disputes e.g. "And another thing...".
- Walk away without deciding when discussion will be resumed (unless violence threatens).
- Bring other peoples' opinions in.
- Argue about something for more than an hour.
- Argue late at night or after drinking.

There is a great range of relationships and of relationship difficulties. Counselling can be a great help clarifying complex relationship problems.

Sexual problems

Sexuality is dealt with on [a separate PDF](#).

No one would expect a child to speak fluently without having to learn and practise. Most people would be surprised if the Halls of Residence only gave one choice of breakfast or if all students were expected to dress the same. People expect to have good days and bad days when it comes to working or performing a sport. However, when it comes to sex, we have a tendency to completely forget that we are all human and all different, and we expect to have instant expertise, total conformity and complete predictability.

A relationship therapist once noted down what helped his clients to resolve their sexual difficulties. He found the largest numbers of clients were helped by being given permission to talk about sex, to express their feelings and to be as they were. Limited information helped the second group of clients - information about the range of human sexual response and about how certain problems came and went. Specific suggestions about different approaches, positions or techniques were the third most useful therapeutic tool. For the final group of clients whose problems were not helped by these techniques, he offered intensive therapy. He referred to the approach as PLISSIT for short and it has become the basis for much sexual therapy. Use it to help you solve your own sexual difficulties.

Permission

Give yourself permission to think about sex, to fantasise about it and to talk about it and to accept that it is perfectly alright for you to have your own likes and dislikes. Sadly, many people have grown up with the idea that it is wrong to have sexual feelings and desires. Most people find their sexuality is enhanced when they stop making rules about what they and their partners ought to like and begin to consider what they actually enjoy. We have to keep our sexual activities within the bounds of what is safe and what does not threaten the freedom of others. However, that does not mean we have to constrain our thinking. The books recommended below are intended to be permission giving as is confidential discussion of concerns in counselling.

Limited Information

Ignorance perpetuates many sexual difficulties. Most people can expect to experience a loss of sexual desire when they are stressed. The simultaneous orgasm invariably depicted by filmmakers and novelists is not the experience of the majority of couples. Most peoples' sexual appetite and preference change as they grow older. Lack of knowledge about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases can lead to great unhappiness when events occur which might have been avoided. There is a lot of information available about sex - in some ways there is so much that it has maybe become devalued. The books recommended below contain much useful information and are a good place to start. Otherwise come and talk to one of the counsellors.

Specific Suggestions

Many distressing sexual problems such as pain during intercourse, inability to achieve orgasm or erectile problems can be greatly helped by simple changes in sexual routine or position. Books, medical advice, conversations with friends or counselling may all help you find these suggestions. Alternatively, you may wish to speak to a sex therapist. Ask your GP for this or consult [Relate](#).

Intensive Therapy

The very thought of sex therapy raises most peoples' anxiety level pretty high! However, this anxiety is misplaced as sex therapy is not the invasive or exposing form of treatment the tabloids may like to imply it is. Don't let these fears stop you finding the help you need.

The largest provider of sex therapy and trainer of sex therapists in the country is Relate (ring 01788 573241 and ask for your local Centre's number). Therapy is provided in complete confidentiality and all the work is done fully clothed! Counselling is offered to couples irrespective of their sexuality, and some therapies are available to individual clients as well.

Problems are normally resolved by means of discussion, the giving of appropriate information about human sexual functioning and by simple behavioural tasks which are completed by clients in the privacy of their own home between sessions. The therapy has a very high success rate, although it does require a commitment to following the treatment programme.

Although inhibition and ignorance are a major cause of sexual problems, some people find themselves trapped in a different way. They have become used to unusual sexual behaviour which can begin to leave them feeling dissatisfied and possibly socially isolated. A similar programme to the one above can still be greatly beneficial.

Further help

The University Counselling Service will offer counselling on relationship problems. Anyone requiring specialist help or help outside the University environment may prefer to contact Relate via the website: www.relate.org.uk which will give you the details of your local branch.

Brook

Sexual health and wellbeing guide for under 25s.

Family Lives: 0808 800 2222

askus@familylives.org.uk.

Relationship advice if you are thinking about separating, want advice on improving your relationship and sex life.

The Mix

Sex and relationships articles and advice.

NHS, Sexual health

Sexual Advice Association

Created to help improve the sexual health and wellbeing of men and women, and to raise awareness of the extent to which sexual conditions affect the general population.

Sexwise

Promoting healthy, happy sex. Run by the national sexual health charity FPA.

Standalone

Advice centre for students who have no contact with their family. Find information about support, financing your studies and accommodation options as an estranged student.

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www.lboro.ac.uk/cds

Switchboard: 0300 330 0630

chris@switchboard.lgbt

LGBT+ helpline to discuss anything, including sexuality, gender identity, sexual health and emotional wellbeing.

Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team: 01509 228338

studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk

To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete [the referral form](#).