



Healthy relationships involve honesty, trust, respect, and open communication between partners, and they take effort and compromise from both people. There is no imbalance of power. Partners respect each other's independence, can make their own decisions without fear of retribution or retaliation, and share decisions.

### **Characteristics of Healthy Relationships**

In a healthy relationship, there is respect for privacy and space, but you do have a commitment to be available to your partner when they need you.

Your partner encourages you to spend time with friends without them, and to participate in activities that you enjoy.

You feel comfortable expressing your opinions and concerns to your partner.

You feel physically safe, and your partner doesn't force you to have sex or to do things that make you feel uncomfortable.

Your partner respects your wishes and feelings, and you can compromise and negotiate when there are disagreements or conflicts.

You and your partner are able to find ways to meet each other's needs in ways that you both feel comfortable with.

### ***Communication***

Building a healthy relationship includes open and honest communication. You and your partner can share your feelings, even when you don't agree, in a way that makes the other person feel safe, heard, and not judged.

Does your partner tell you how they feel instead of just giving you the silent treatment? Do you tell your partner how you feel and make an effort to talk things through? If you made a mistake, would you tell your partner? Would your partner tell you?

Open and honest communication is an important part of every relationship because it allows you to share who you are and what you need from the people around you.

When talking about something important, talk when you are feeling calm or take some time to cool down if you had a fight. Talk about your concerns before they become problems and get

worse. Make sure you are talking privately so you can be open about your feelings. Make eye contact; face them; give your full attention and lean in as they are speaking.

### ***Listening***

Pay attention without distractions (put your phone away) when the other person is talking. Listen to what they are saying instead of just thinking about how to respond and wait for them to finish talking before you say something. Use acknowledging statements like *interesting* to let them know you hear what they are saying. Ask questions if you don't understand something to avoid confusion and misunderstanding; don't leave them hanging (if you need to think about what they said before responding, tell them that). Be prepared to hear something that you don't like and really think about it before responding.

### ***Consent***

Most commonly used when you're being sexually active, giving consent means that you are okay with what is happening, and that no one is forcing you or guiltig you into doing anything that you don't want to do. Consent can be given and taken back at any time, and giving consent once does not mean you automatically give consent in the future.

Consent is an agreement between two people, given through words or actions, that they are both clearly and enthusiastically willing to engage in sexual activity. Silence or lack of resistance does not count as consent. Some people aren't able to give consent, such as individuals who are drunk, sleeping, unconscious, or have some intellectual disabilities. Consent involves active communication and knowing that one person always has the right to withdraw consent. This means that someone can consent to one activity (kissing) but not to another (sex). Consent, like sex, should be about respecting each other to make their own decisions about their body.

Getting consent can be simple: it's all about communication. You can talk about boundaries before engaging in sexual activity, but you should also regularly check in with a simple "Is this okay?" to ensure that everyone involved is comfortable with what is going on.

### ***Boundaries***

Having boundaries is like drawing a line. One side has the things you are okay with and the other side those that you are not okay with, don't feel ready for, or that make you uncomfortable. This line looks different for everyone, so it is important for you to know where yours need to be drawn. Setting boundaries is a way to teach your partner about your needs and let you know when something doesn't feel right. You are allowed to put your needs before someone else's needs, especially if theirs make you uncomfortable.

Respecting boundaries means that when you tell your partner something makes you uncomfortable, they respect that and stop what they are doing. Does it go both ways?

## ***Digital Communication***

Don't have an important conversation over text or online. When chatting online, focus on the conversation instead of being distracted by other things or having multiple other conversations. If you can't respond, let the other person know so you don't leave them hanging.

## ***Trust***

It can take time to build trust. While it can be hard to trust someone, especially if your trust was broken in the past, you can't blame your current partner for something someone else did. Building trust in a relationship means if you needed your partner to listen to you because you were having a bad day, or if you needed a ride home from school, would they be there for you? Would you be there for them?

## **Guiding Principles for a Successful Relationship**

Partners should serve as the primary go-to people for one another. I have observed that partners who create and maintain a tether to one another experience more personal safety and security, have more energy, take more risks, and experience overall less stress than couples who do not. When you commit to serving as a go-to person for your partner, you open the door for your partner to do the same for you. Then you both can enjoy free and unencumbered access to one another in terms of time and frame of mind. In this way, you build synergy in your relationship such that you are able to operate together in ways that are greater than if you each lived as essentially separate individuals.

In this way, you both feel comfortable enough to voice any resistance, hesitations, or trepidations. If one of you is an island or wave, you might discuss how you feel about being tethered to your partner. Look both at what scares you and at how you stand to benefit from maintaining this tether. Brainstorm ways to handle any situations in which you might be tempted to withhold yourself. It can be mutually reinforcing to verbalize your agreement regularly.

This may mean being able to share and discuss all the feelings, worries, concerns, and doubts, as well as the joys and emotional highs. It means sharing old secrets and memories. It means revealing crushes and infatuations and fantasies. Being available to your partner may mean being available 24/7 for things that to anyone else outside the relationship might seem trivial or not worth their time.

## **The Couple Bubble**

Partners who create a couple bubble enter into an agreement to put the relationship before anything and everything else. They agree to abide by the principle "We come first." One of the specific agreements they can make to carry this out is to serve as the go-to person for one another. The couple bubble is an assurance to one another that they are not alone. They do this for each other because they want to. The couple with a couple bubble maintains their bubble because they can and because they appreciate how loved and secure it helps them feel. In a

secure relationship, partners wouldn't ask this of anyone else, and nobody else would want to do it for them.

Partners in a couple bubble who agree to be available go-to people for each other benefit in ways nobody outside the bubble can. Maintenance of the couple bubble can feel burdensome at times, but the effort is well worth the trouble. Partners who expect one another to be available 24/7 are and should be considered high maintenance. In our culture, being labeled high maintenance usually is considered a pejorative. Typically, men speak about a woman as high maintenance if they see her as demanding attention, overly concerned about her appearance, or hard to please. This is not what I mean here. I am speaking about two people who are willing to go the extra mile for each other. They are willing to put in the highest level of effort possible for their mutual benefit. They are willing to give freely, knowing they will receive the same in return. They are high maintenance because they expect their partner to be available at all times.

Creating a couple bubble allows partners to keep each other safe and secure. The couple bubble is a pact between partners in which the quid pro quo is to burden one another with the tasks of devotion and caring for the other's safety, security, and well-being. This mutual burden determines the degree of shared gratitude and valuation they both can experience.

Partners relate to one another primarily as securely attached, anxiously attached (waves) or avoidant (islands). If your partner is a wave, he or she may insist too much on verbal assurances of love and security. This is the reverse of what we see with an avoidant, who is less prone to seek or even care about such assurances. During conflict, a wave will tend to focus on the past and avoid the present and future.

Partners who are experts on one another know how to please and soothe each other. Partners with busy lives create and use bedtime and morning rituals, as well as reunion rituals, to stay connected. Partners who serve as the primary go-to people for one another should prevent each other from being a third wheel when relating to outsiders outside the couple bubble.

### *Let's learn how...*

Partners in couples counseling often speak of needing emotional closeness from their partner, wanting assurance that their lover will respond when they are upset. They talk about wanting to feel more confident about exploring the world when they know that their lover has their back. They also indicate different ways of dealing with their partners. When they feel secure with their lover, they can reach out and connect easily; when they feel insecure, they either become anxious, angry, and controlling or they avoid contact altogether and stay distant. This is just what Bowlby and Ainsworth had found with mothers and children. The attachment needs of each partner must be recognized and worked with (Siegel & Hartzell, 2004; Taylor, 2000).

A secure partner is able to share their unhappiness openly and ask for support from their partner. The more we can reach out to our partners, the more separate and independent we can be. Those who felt close to and could depend on partners reported feeling less angry with and attributed less malicious intent to their partners. They described themselves as expressing anger in a more controlled way and expressed more positive goals, such as solving problems and reconnecting with their partners.

Women with an insecure attachment style generally deny their attachment needs, avoid closeness, and are more likely to withdraw when conflicts in relationship surface; those with a secure attachment are able to openly discuss their feelings without guilt or shame. Men typically respond to their partners in two ways: When they described themselves as secure with relationships, they become even more supportive than usual, touching, smiling at their partners, and offering comfort; if they described themselves as uncomfortable with attachment needs, they became markedly less sympathetic when their partners expressed their needs, downplaying their partners' distress, showing less warmth, and touching less. This may lead to a partner feeling rejected, which triggers the part of the brain known as the anterior cingulate. The anterior cingulate reacts to physical and emotional pain. In fact, this part of the brain turns on anytime we are emotionally separated from those who are close to us.

When we feel safely linked to our partners, we more easily roll with the hurts they inevitably inflict, and we are less likely to be aggressively hostile when we get mad at them.

In a secure relationship, maintaining private compartments, whether having to do with money, sexuality, shameful events, or even any conceivable threat to one's partner, is counterproductive.

Partners in a relationship based on mutuality agree they will feel safer and more secure if they fully know each other. Their goal is for both partners to be themselves within the relationship. Even if this is not possible in the outside world, they can be who they truly are with each other. They completely avail themselves to one another and grant permission to share whatever is on their mind without reservation, and they agree to be go-to people for each other.

Islands and waves, on the other hand, often spread themselves among many different people. No one person knows everything about them, except perhaps in the case of a wave who chooses someone other than his or her primary partner as a confidant and tells everything to that individual. This is an emotional affair. Why do islands and waves do this? Because in their eyes, elevating someone to primary attachment status makes that person dangerous. At the slightest provocation by their partner, their amygdalae run wild, and they want to avoid this.