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Relationships 101: Having Healthy Relationships in Your First Year of College

By Dr. Gary W. Lewandowski Jr. & Miranda E. Bobrowski
Monmouth University - West Long Branch NJ

College is all about new experiences:

the start of a new life, new friends, new freedom, and new relationship experiences. Not surprisingly, romantic relationships are responsible for life's happiest moments.¹ For that reason, it is important to avoid problematic relationships that could jeopardize your college education. To help, we'll identify qualities of healthy relationships in the context of common relationship experiences that students encounter during their first year in college.

Long Distance Relationships

When you left for college, you brought your favorite pillow and favorite clothes, but did you also bring along your high school sweetheart? If not, then chances are that you are in good company since 75% of college students have a long-distance relationship at some point during their college careers.² These relationships can be difficult because you don't get to see your partner as much and you may feel lonely.³ Don't worry though, long distance relationships are generally no worse off than relationships with nearby partners.⁴ You should fight the urge to leave school to be near them (either at

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home or at another school) because long distance relationships also have some benefits such as viewing each other more positively and being more satisfied with the communication in the relationship.⁵ It may just take a bit of extra effort to maintain closeness with your partner (e.g., texting, Skype, Face Time, phone calls, etc.).

Dealing with Break-up

For a variety of reasons, break-ups are common in the first-year of college. Maybe your high school relationship didn't work out, or a new college relationship fizzled out. Break-ups can result in negative emotions and feeling less sure of who you are.⁶ Yet, when college students predict how bad things will be after a break-up, they think it'll be worse than it is.⁷ In fact, over 41% of college students view their break-ups as positive experiences, with this being even more likely if the former partner was holding you back.⁸ To get over a break-up try writing about the positive aspects of the experience⁹, relying on social support¹⁰, and avoiding getting back together with your former partner.¹¹ In fact, rather than jumping right back into a relationship, spend some time alone and focus on yourself because having a clear sense about who you are will lead to better relationships down the road.¹²

Starting a New Relationship

One of the quintessential college experiences may be the quest to form new relationships. But where should you look? A lot of times attraction is a matter of convenience.¹³ Hello neighbor! However, living down the hall from someone may not be the best foundation for a healthy relationship. If there

was a law of attraction it would state that you should find someone as similar to you as possible.¹⁴ If you are studious, like the beach, and enjoy the movies, your partner should as well. When looking for a partner, you'll want to detect whether the other person is interested. Did the object of your affection give you "the look", or was there simply something in his or her eye? Here it is important to realize that men have a tendency to see interest where it may not exist. A woman's innocent "hi!" may be interpreted as "she wants to hook-up."¹⁵

Building a Healthy Relationship

Everyone wants to have a great relationship. To accomplish this goal you should build your relationship around a solid friendship founded on trust, closeness, honesty, and a sense of openness that includes mutual self-disclosure.¹⁶ To achieve this, good communication is important especially when discussing problems. Many people (mistakenly) believe that disagreements are destructive in relationships. However, you should be secure enough in your relationship to discuss the small issues that inevitably arise so that they don't turn into major drama. Most importantly, avoid negative forms of communication like criticizing partners, being overly defensive, refusing to talk/shutting them out, or having a lack of respect or contempt.¹⁷ The research shows that relationships with this type of communication are certain to end. Ultimately, healthy relationships and good communication both rely on mutual respect and caring. Demonstrate these qualities to your partner by clearly and calmly discussing problems, stating how you feel without blaming or attacking, and taking the time to truly listen to your partner's perspective.¹⁸

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Love is also important in healthy relationships, but what type of love is most important? There are two main types: companionate love, which is based on friendship, and passionate love, which is based on attraction and preoccupation with the partner.¹⁹ Although passion may get a relationship started, it fades. A romance with a partner who is also your best friend is more likely to stand the test of time. When thinking about love, avoid the mistaken belief that love conquers all. Love is a key ingredient, but it does not mean that you should tolerate disrespectful or abusive behavior.

Relationship Abuse

Although a majority of relationships don't experience physical or verbal abuse, the prevalence of dating violence is growing and occurs in approximately 1 out of 3 college relationships.²⁰ Yet, people in abusive relationships often believe that because it happens to them it must be "normal" and happening in most relationships.²¹ But look back at the statistics. Most college students are in happy, healthy relationships. Be sure to steer clear of factors that can promote relationship violence, such as high levels of dependency²² and alcohol use.²³ If you or a friend experience relationship abuse, seek help from your campus counseling center. The bottom line is that abuse should be an automatic deal breaker because relationships should be one of the happiest and most fulfilling parts of your life.

Staying in a Bad Relationship

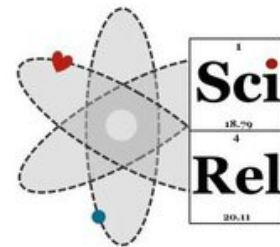
Obviously no one aspires to be in a bad relationship, so why would anyone get stuck in one? First, people may stay because their expectations

are too low or they think that they can't do any better than the current partner.²⁴ Second, we tend to prefer people who reinforce our self-views.²⁵ If you have a negative self-view, you'll tend to seek out others who also see you that way. To make matters worse, a partner who views you negatively isn't likely to treat you well, which may lower your relationship expectations and self-esteem even further. It is also important to avoid losing your own sense of identity by becoming *too* close to a romantic partner.²⁶ To help recognize if you are in a bad relationship, you should turn to close others (roommates, friends, parents) who, research shows, are better judges of your relationship than you.²⁷ If people close to you suggest that you should get out of a relationship, it may be wise to seriously consider their advice.

* * *

In conclusion,

a healthy relationship will help make you a happier and better person without requiring you to forsake your friendships or educational goals. Learning these basics of healthy relationships will come in handy during your first year of college, and will also benefit your future relationships in a way that will lead you to experience a happier and more fulfilling life.



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