
Am I in a Healthy Relationship?

It Feels Like Love - But Is It?

Sometimes it feels impossible to find someone who's right for you — and who thinks *you're* right for him or her! So when it happens, you're usually so psyched that you don't even mind when your little brother finishes all the ice cream or your English teacher chooses the one day when you didn't do your reading to give you a pop quiz.

It's totally normal to look at the world through rose-colored glasses in the early stages of a relationship. But for some people, those rose-colored glasses turn into blinders that keep them from seeing that a relationship isn't as healthy as it should be.

What Makes a Healthy Relationship?

Hopefully, you and your significant other are treating each other well. Not sure if that's the case? Take a step back from the dizzying sensation of being swept off your feet and think about whether your relationship has these seven qualities:

- **Mutual respect.** Does he or she get how cool you are and why? (Watch out if the answer to the first part is yes but only because you're acting like someone you're not!) The key is that your BF or GF is into you for who you are — for your great sense of humor, your love of reality TV, etc. Does your partner listen when you say you're not comfortable doing something and then back off right away? Respect in a relationship means that each person values who the other is and understands — and would never challenge — the other person's boundaries.
- **Trust.** You're talking with a guy from French class and your boyfriend walks by. Does he completely lose his cool or keep walking because he knows you'd never cheat on him? It's OK to get a little jealous sometimes — jealousy is a natural emotion. But how a person reacts when feeling jealous is what matters. There's no way you can have a healthy relationship if you don't trust each other.
- **Honesty.** This one goes hand-in-hand with trust because it's tough to trust someone when one of you isn't being honest. Have you ever caught your girlfriend in a major lie? Like she told you that she had to work on Friday night but it turned out she was at the movies with her friends? The next time she says she has to work, you'll have a lot more trouble believing her and the trust will be on shaky ground.
- **Support.** It's not just in bad times that your partner should support you. Some people are great when your whole world is falling apart but can't take being there when things are going right (and vice versa). In a healthy relationship, your significant other is there with a shoulder to cry on when you find out your parents are getting divorced **and** to celebrate with you when you get the lead in a play.
- **Fairness/equality.** You need to have give-and-take in your relationship, too. Do you take turns choosing which new movie to see? As a couple, do you hang out with your partner's friends as often as you hang out with yours? It's not like you have to keep a running count and make sure things are exactly even, of course. But you'll know if it isn't a pretty fair balance. Things get bad really fast when a relationship turns into a power struggle, with one person fighting to get his or her way all the time.
- **Separate identities.** In a healthy relationship, everyone needs to make compromises. But that doesn't mean you should feel like you're losing out on being yourself. When you started going out, you both had your own lives (families, friends, interests, hobbies, etc.) and that shouldn't change. Neither of you should have to pretend to like something you don't, or give up seeing your friends, or drop out of activities you love. And you also should feel free to keep developing new talents or interests, making new friends, and moving forward.
- **Good communication.** You've probably heard lots of stuff about how men and women don't seem to speak the same language. We all know how many different meanings the little phrase "no, nothing's wrong" can have, depending on who's saying it! But what's important is to ask if

you're not sure what he or she means, and speak honestly and openly so that the miscommunication is avoided in the first place. Never keep a feeling bottled up because you're afraid it's not what your BF or GF wants to hear or because you worry about sounding silly. And if you need some time to think something through before you're ready to talk about it, the right person will give you some space to do that if you ask for it.

What's an Unhealthy Relationship?

A relationship is unhealthy when it involves mean, disrespectful, controlling, or abusive behavior. Some people live in homes with parents who fight a lot or abuse each other — emotionally, verbally, or physically. For some people who have grown up around this kind of behavior it can almost seem normal or OK. **It's not!** Many of us learn from watching and imitating the people close to us. So someone who has lived around violent or disrespectful behavior may not have learned how to treat others with kindness and respect or how to expect the same treatment.

Qualities like kindness and respect are absolute requirements for a healthy relationship. Someone who doesn't yet have this part down may need to work on it with a trained therapist before he or she is ready for a relationship. Meanwhile, even though you might feel bad or feel for someone who's been mistreated, you need to take care of yourself — it's not healthy to stay in a relationship that involves abusive behavior of any kind.

Warning Signs

When a boyfriend or girlfriend uses verbal insults, mean language, nasty putdowns, gets physical by hitting or slapping, or forces someone into sexual activity, it's an important warning sign of verbal, emotional, or physical abuse.

Ask yourself, does my boyfriend or girlfriend:

- get angry when I don't drop everything for him or her?
- criticize the way I look or dress, and say I'll never be able to find anyone else who would date me?
- keep me from seeing friends or from talking to any other guys or girls?
- want me to quit an activity, even though I love it?
- ever raise a hand when angry, like he or she is about to hit me?
- try to force me to go further sexually than I want to?

These aren't the only questions you can ask yourself. If you can think of any way in which your boyfriend or girlfriend is trying to control you, make you feel bad about yourself, isolate you from the rest of your world, or — this is a big one — harm you physically or sexually, then it's time to get out, *fast*. Let a trusted friend or family member know what's going on and make sure you're safe.

It can be tempting to make excuses or misinterpret violence, possessiveness, or anger as an expression of love. But even if you know that the person hurting you loves you, it is not healthy. No one deserves to be hit, shoved, or forced into anything he or she doesn't want to do.

Why Are Some Relationships So Difficult?

Ever heard about how it's hard for someone to love you when you don't love yourself? It's a big relationship roadblock when one or both people struggle with self-esteem problems. Your girlfriend or boyfriend isn't there to make you feel good about yourself if you can't do that on your own. Focus on being happy with yourself, and don't take on the responsibility of worrying about someone else's happiness.

What if you feel that your girlfriend or boyfriend needs too much from you? If the relationship feels like a burden or a drag instead of a joy, it might be time to think about whether it's a healthy match for you. Someone who's not happy or secure may have trouble being a healthy relationship partner.

Also, intense relationships can be hard for some teenagers. Some are so focused on their own developing feelings and responsibilities that they don't have the emotional energy it takes to respond to someone else's feelings and needs in a close relationship. Don't worry if you're just not ready yet. You will be, and you can take all the time you need.

Ever notice that some teen relationships don't last very long? It's no wonder — you're still growing and changing every day, and it can be tough to put two people together whose identities are both still in the process of forming. You two might seem perfect for each other at first, but that can change. If you try to hold on to the relationship anyway, there's a good chance it will turn sour. Better to part as friends than to stay in something that you've outgrown or that no longer feels right for one or both of you. And before you go looking for amour from that hottie from French class, respect your current beau by breaking things off before you make your move.

Relationships can be one of the best — and most challenging — parts of your world. They can be full of fun, romance, excitement, intense feelings, and occasional heartache, too. Whether you're single or

in a relationship, remember that it's good to be choosy about who you get close to. If you're still waiting, take your time and get to know plenty of people.

Think about the qualities you value in a friendship and see how they match up with the ingredients of a healthy relationship. Work on developing those good qualities in yourself — they make you a lot more attractive to others. And if you're already part of a pair, make sure the relationship you're in brings out the best in both of you.

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