

## **RELATIONSHIPS**

### **Introduction**

Relationships – whether family, friends 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, anger 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.

Researchers who have looked 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 other to be exactly like them; they work to accept differences.

#### **Capacity for boundaries**

People are aware that there is a point where they stop and the other person begins and that it is unrealistic to expect others to solve all our problems or meet all our needs.

#### **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 wrong.

#### **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 fair way to fulfil these different goals.

#### **Sharing positive feelings**

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

It might be that a relationship requires quite a lot of individual skill for this. It is comforting to consider the research of John Bowlby on attachment. He concluded that human beings are innately social and tend instinctively to know how to form close attachments to others. 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 over-anxious about our relationships.

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 as there might be a lot of people involved. Also most of us are not used to looking at our families objectively. However a bit of reflection and analysis can take the heat out of a lot of difficult situations.

If you have found yourself in a disagreement with your family about something:

- 1.** Try and think objectively about what you are trying to achieve. Give yourself the benefit of the doubt and attribute the best motives to your behaviour. If at this point you realise you're doing the wrong thing, you might want to make a strategic withdrawal/stop there/consider apologising! 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. If so:
- 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 of reassuring 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 sympathies with their disappointment. You may have to drop your points into the conversation over a period of time. Don't expect a miracle – people rarely change their opinions overnight. Don't feel you have to have a 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.

## **Dealing with Problems in Your Personal Relationships**

Problems can arise from a large number of 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:

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

There are many different reasons for entering into 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?

### **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 to 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, stress or pain, 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, or emotional/psychological abuse/controlling behaviour. Do look for the support you need to change or end a relationship if abuse is happening to you.

### **How you get 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. Finding such models can be a particularly important task whether you are heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual same-gender couples.

### **Can you talk about problems?**

In all relationships there are going to be times of serious disagreement, where a conflict of interests has to 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.

If you are not in the habit of talking in your relationship, it might be interesting /helpful to give it a try. Relationships can be well worth exploring.

### **Golden rules for arguing constructively**

#### **DO:**

- Know why you are arguing before you start – be specific
- Devote some time to resolving the problem
- 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
- Deliberately hurt the other person's feelings
- Generalise
- Bring up old unresolved disputes
- Walk away without deciding when discussion will be resumed (unless violence threatens)
- Bring other people's 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 help in allowing you to clarify and resolve complex relationship problems.***

## **Books/Agencies**

The Relate Guide to Better Relationships by Sarah Litvinoff, Vermilion. (A comprehensive and easy to read guide to all aspects of couple relationships. Includes many case histories and a lot of self-help exercises.)

The Relate Guide to Sex in Loving Relationships by Sarah Litvinoff, Vermilion. (Covers a wealth of sexual difficulties and how to resolve them).

STOP Arguing START Talking: The 10 Point Plan for Couples in Conflict by Susan Quilliam, Vermilion.

Boundaries and Relationships: Knowing, Protecting and Enjoying the Self by Charles L. Whitfield, HCI.

Relate - offers help to couples and family members having relationship problems.  
Tel: 0300 100 1234  
Website: [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

Families and How to Survive Them by Robin Skynner and John Cleese, Vermilion. (A lighthearted book which nonetheless explores many of the dynamics of family life well.)