

## Healthy versus unhealthy relationships <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

What are some ways to identify and deal with unhealthy relationships? And what strategies can people use to enhance relationships? What are some internal and external support resources that are available for people dealing with unhealthy relationships?

### Answer

Dear Reader,

Throughout life, people experience all kinds of relationships. While healthy relationships have the potential to improve feelings of self-worth, enjoyment, and personal growth, unhealthy relationships may leave people feeling disrespected, controlled, and in some circumstances, unsafe. Keep in mind that in all kinds of partnerships, there is likely to be some disagreement, need for compromise, and times of frustration. These alone don't necessarily indicate that a relationship is unhealthy, and the ways that these situations are handled may be indicators of one that is healthy. There are some strategies that can be used to strengthen and enhance relationships, but for people who are looking to leave an unhealthy partnership, resources are available (more on that in a bit).

Before identifying what makes a relationship unhealthy, it'll be helpful to understand what makes a partnership healthy. Some signs of a healthy relationship include:

- Treating each other with respect, honesty, and trust.
- Feeling secure and comfortable.
- Resolving conflicts through compromise and safely finding solutions.
- Supporting each other.
- Communicating openly and clearly.
- Encouraging other friendships and relationships.
- Maintaining individual identities, including personal hobbies and interests.
- Having privacy and individuality in the relationship.
- Have more positive feelings in the relationship than negative.
- Being able to make compromises.
- Fighting fairly and controlling anger during arguments.

- Honesty about past and present sexual activity (if the relationship is sexual).
- A sexual relationship that is consensual.

In order to enhance and strengthen relationships, research points to a few strategies. It may be as simple as showing interest in the other person's life. This includes both attempting to make connections with your partner but also responding to their attempts to connect. This can range from asking about their day to learning more about their inner feelings. Another way to bolster a relationship is to be kind in moments of conflict. By remaining open, rather than focusing on blame and criticism, conflict may be handled with a more positive approach. The last strategy is taking responsibility for personal wrongdoings or mistakes. Taking the time to repair the relationship after hurt feelings or fights can strengthen the relationship as a whole, even if at first it's painful.

On the other hand, in an unhealthy relationship, one or both partners may exhibit some of the following signs, which include:

- Disrespecting the other through ridicule, name calling, ignoring the other, or criticism of the other or the other's friends.
- Controlling or manipulating the other over what each other does, what they wear, who they spend time with, or material resources (e.g., money, housing, etc.).
- Lying or withholding information from the other.
- Picking fights or antagonizing the other.
- Partners feeling as though they are dependent on the other for their life to continue.
- Making the other feel bad about themselves.
- Not making time for each other.
- Being afraid of the other's temper.
- Criticizing or supporting others in criticism of people with the other partner's gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or other personal attribute.
- Harming or threatening to harm children, family, pets, or objects of personal value.
- Using physical violence (pushing, grabbing, hitting, punching, or throwing objects).
- Using physical force or threats to prevent the other from leaving.
- Forcing a partner into sexual activity that wasn't consensual.

Sometimes it's not easy to determine if a troublesome tie can be maintained in its current state, can be improved, or is best ended before going any further. For those experiencing potentially worrisome relationships, reflecting on the partnership may be helpful: Is there something stressful (e.g., finances, housing, employment, life transitions) happening that could be impacting it? Are there problems from earlier in the relationship that were never resolved and are now resurfacing? What part of the relationship is most bothersome, and what changes may improve it? Can this relationship be improved? Talking over these questions with each other or with a trusted friend, family member, or mental health professional could be helpful. Thinking about what, if anything, could make each other more comfortable in the relationship may be key to continuing the partnership. If the concerns are insurmountable or potentially dangerous, ending that relationship is also an option.

If a partner, friend, or colleague is harming you or your loved ones physically, emotionally, or sexually, it's time to seek help. If they're encouraging other harmful behaviors, like abuse of

alcohol or other drugs, unsafe sexual activity, or other activities that make you feel uncomfortable, you have a right to leave. There are a lot of resources available to help provide information and support:

- [24-hour National Domestic Violence Hotlines](#) <sup>[2]</sup> (Seven days a week)  
National Bilingual Hotline: (800) 799-SAFE (-7233)  
(will translate into over 130 languages)  
TTY: (800) 787-3224
- [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#) <sup>[3]</sup>  
(offers a practice directory for referrals to psychological services)  
(800) 374-2723  
TTY: (800) 336-6123
- [YMCA of the U.S.A.](#) <sup>[4]</sup>  
(800) 872-9622
- [YWCA of the U.S.A.](#) <sup>[5]</sup>  
(202) 467-0801

Each and every person deserves to feel safe, valued, and cared about. Perhaps the main thing to do is to trust your instincts and the people close to you whose opinions you trust and value. Keep in mind that one of the strongest signs of a healthy relationship is that both people involved feel good about themselves. Also, by treating yourself with respect and believing in your right to be treated well, you are taking critical steps towards developing equitable, mutually fulfilling ties in the future.

Alice!

Category:

[Relationships](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

[Nonconsensual Relationships](#) <sup>[7]</sup>

[Relationship Stuff](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

[Relating & Communicating](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

## Related questions

[Setting boundaries for work relationships](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

[What about emotional abuse?](#) <sup>[11]</sup>

[Sexual harassment](#) <sup>[12]</sup>

[It's Greek \(yogurt\) to me!](#) <sup>[13]</sup>

## Resources

[Sexual Violence Response & Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center](#) <sup>[14]</sup>

[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CPS\) \(Morningside\)](#) <sup>[15]</sup>

[Mental Health Services \(CUIMC\)](#) <sup>[16]</sup>

Published date:

Jan 22, 1999

Last reviewed on:

Nov 17, 2017

## Footer menu

- ▼ Contact Alice!
  - Content Use
  - Media Inquiries
  - Comments & Corrections
- ▼ Syndication & Licensing
  - Licensing Q&As
  - Get Alice! on Your Website
  - Full Site Syndication
  - Link to Go Ask Alice!

**Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.**

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

---

**Source URL:** <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/healthy-versus-unhealthy-relationships-0>

### Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/healthy-versus-unhealthy-relationships-0>
- [2] <http://www.thehotline.org/>
- [3] <http://www.apa.org/>
- [4] <http://www.ymca.net/>
- [5] <http://www.ywca.org/>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationships>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/nonconsensual-relationships>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationship-stuff>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relating-communicating>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/setting-boundaries-work-relationships>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-about-emotional-abuse-0>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/sexual-harassment-0>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/its-greek-yogurt-me-0>
- [14] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/sexual-violence-response-rape-crisisanti-violence-support-center>
- [15] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>
- [16] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>