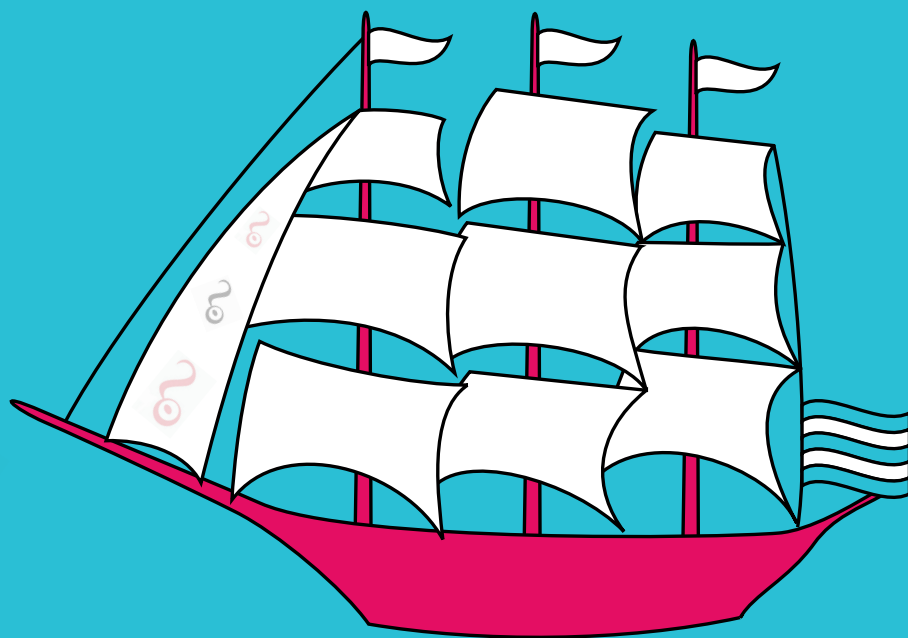


No Bias. No Judgement. No Exception.

A guide to navigating healthy relationships during the COVID-19 outbreak



This guide, created in collaboration with Mr. Daniel Flynn (Principal Psychology Manager, HSE Cork South Mental Health Services), provides a toolkit to help you to maintain healthy relationships in the context of social distancing measures.

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We are all in the same boat.

While everyone's circumstances are different, the COVID-19 pandemic requires everybody to take a new approach to relationships:



When times are hard, a common and natural reaction is to become increasingly judgemental and critical of yourself and others.



Human beings have a wide emotional range. It is normal to feel low and negative at times. The real problem lies in not recognising your own emotional reactions.



In order to maintain healthy, honest relationships, it is essential to be aware of, and understanding of, your own emotions.



The issues addressed in this guide are increasingly prevalent since the implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures, such as social distancing. Everybody deals with relationship problems at some point in their lives, and it is normal to be feeling particularly challenged by your relationships during the pandemic. In our efforts to recognise our own emotions and maintain healthy relationships, we are all in the same boat.

What are relationships?

Your relationships are the connections that you have with people.
They include your connections to:



Yourself



Romantic and/or sexual partners



Family members



Friends



Acquaintances



Colleagues

Self-worth: the relationship anchor.



Just as an anchor stops a ship from drifting in to rocky territory, a healthy relationship with yourself will prevent you from forming unhealthy habits in your relationships with others.








Your relationship with yourself is the most consistent relationship in your life, and it impacts all of your other relationships.



“Self-esteem is what we think and feel and believe about ourselves. Self-worth is recognising ‘I am greater than all of those things.’ It is a deep knowing that I am of value, that I am loveable, necessary to this life, and of incomprehensible worth.” - Dr. Christina Hibbert, 2013.








Creating a healthy relationship with yourself.

Your relationship with yourself impacts all aspects of your life. Creating a positive, healthy relationship with yourself is important for many reasons:

-  Your opinion of yourself is the one that matters most. Other peoples' opinions about you are outside of your control and should never be prioritised.
-  No one else knows you as well as you do.
-  Having self-respect will mean that you are more likely to adjust or end relationships with people who do not respect you.
-  A positive body image can help prevent unhealthy dieting habits, mental and physical health issues and sexual anxiety.
-  You are the only person responsible for your happiness.

Maintaining a healthy relationship with yourself.

Tools such as positive self-talk and active gratitude can help you to build a positive perspective on your own personality, beliefs, abilities and appearance.

-  Assess and adjust your self-talk - would you talk to a loved one in the same way that you talk to yourself?
-  Keep a gratitude journal - regularly note something about yourself or your life that you are thankful for.
-  Be open to mistakes. If you slip back in to old habits, do not be hard on yourself - it takes time to change a mindset.
-  Unfollow social media accounts that leave you feeling negative.
-  Avoid comparing yourself to others.
-  Prioritise your opinion of yourself, over others' opinion of you.
-  Set aside time regularly for activities you enjoy.

Creating healthy relationships with others.

Your relationships with other people can have a significant impact on your life and your health. It is important to recognise the value of creating healthy relationships, and the risks involved in creating unhealthy relationships.



Unhealthy relationships can contribute to feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem and negativity.



Unhealthy relationships can lead you to abandon your personal needs, priorities and values, or to make life-altering decisions based on others' needs rather than your own.



Prolonged conflict with others and social isolation have been linked to various health issues such as depression, heart disease, functional impairment and inflammation.

- Newsom, J. T., Mahan, T. L., Rook, K. S., & Krause, N. (2008). *Stable negative social exchanges and health*. *Health Psychology*, 27(1), 78-86. www.doi.org/10.1037/0278-6133.27.1.78
- Smith K.J., Gavey S., Riddell N.E., Kontari P., Victor C. (2020). *The association between loneliness, social isolation and inflammation: A systematic review and meta-analysis*. www.doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2020.02.002

Maintaining healthy relationships with others.

The 'Equality Wheel' highlights the basis of a healthy romantic partnership as respect, trust, and nonviolence. Many of the 'Equality Wheel' requirements also apply to relationships with family, friends, etc. This equality wheel is adapted from the original Duluth model by Domestic Abuse Intervention Project: theduluthmodel.org



Behavioural practices.

The 'Equality Wheel' highlights the basis of a healthy romantic partnership as respect, trust, and nonviolence. Many of the 'Equality Wheel' requirements also apply to relationships with family, friends, etc.



Negotiation and fairness - Seeking mutually satisfying resolutions to conflict, accepting change and being willing to compromise.



Respect - Listening to the other person non-judgementally, being emotionally affirming and understanding and valuing opinions.



Trust and support - supporting the other persons' goals in life, respecting their right to their own feelings, friends, activities, and opinions.



Honesty and accountability - Accepting responsibility for yourself, acknowledging past abuse, admitting being wrong, communicating openly and truthfully.



Responsible parenting - Sharing parenting responsibilities, being a positive non-abusive role model for the children.



Shared responsibility - Mutually agreeing on a fair distribution of work and making family decisions together.



Financial responsibility - Making money decisions together and making sure both partners benefit from financial arrangements.



Non-threatening behaviour - Talking and acting so that the other person feels safe and comfortable expressing themselves and doing things.

Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills.

In order to maintain open, honest and healthy relationships, we need to be aware of, and understand, our emotions. Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT) is one tool that can be useful for any person, in any type of relationship.

GIVE - Building intimacy and understanding

- **G**entle - Be courteous and temperate in your approach; no attacks, threats or judging.
- **I**nterested - Listen; be interested in the other person.
- **V**alidate - Validate the other person's feelings, wants, and opinions about the situation.
- **E**asy manner - Be diplomatic; smile; soft sell over hard sell.

DEAR MAN - Assertion

- **D**escribe the current situation.
- **E**xpress your feelings and opinions about the situation; Use "I" statements e.g. I feel...
- **A**ssert yourself by asking for what you want, or saying "No." clearly.
- **R**einforce or reward the person ahead of time: explain consequences.
- **M**indfully keep your focus on your objectives: don't be distracted.
- **A**ppear confident and effective: good eye contact, no stammering.
- **N**egotiate: be willing to give to get.

FAST - Self-reflection

- **F**air - Be fair to yourself and to the other person.
- (No) **A**pologies - No apologies if you are not in the wrong e.g. for making a request, having an opinion, disagreeing, etc.
- **S**tick - Stick to your own values. Be clear on what you believe is the moral way to act.
- **T** - Truthful. Don't lie, exaggerate or make excuses.

Isolation and cohabitation

If you are living with a romantic partner, family members, or other housemates, the impact of COVID-19 includes significant new challenges to maintaining these relationships.



Check in

While you and your partner or housemate may be chatting throughout the day, your conversations may become mostly small talk, rather than sharing your experience of the pandemic.

Regularly discuss how you feel about staying at home, particularly if one or both of you has faced unemployment, loss, or challenging relationships with other cohabitants.



Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse services are still in operation across Ireland. If you have any concerns for your immediate safety please contact the Gardaí on 999 or 112. You can also contact any of the free and confidential domestic abuse services throughout Ireland - details can be found here:

www.safeireland.ie/get-help/where-to-find-help

Isolation and intimacy

Whether you and your partner are living in the same household or not, isolation may lead to difficulties in maintaining a healthy relationship. A lack of physical contact can be isolating and distressing, while spending all day with your partner can cause frustration and cabin fever.



Date Night

Do something for yourselves as a couple once a week if you can. As well as bringing some structure to your week, getting dressed up could give you a feeling of normality! Take time to prepare as you would for a regular date. If you are not living together, this could include the following:

- Watch a film - the Netflix Party App allows you to stream videos along with your partner or friends etc. The app syncs up what you're watching so you can message and voice chat throughout. Dim the lights and light a few candles to set the mood!
- DJ together - the JQBX App lets you queue music so that you and your partner can listen to the same music at the same time.
- Make plans - schedule a video call to discuss what you will do as a couple when social distancing restrictions are no longer in place.
- Activity time - all you need is some paper and a pen. Have a look at our couple's activities at the end of this guide.



#SafeRsex

Due to restrictions on STI screening services, it is vital to take extra precautions to prevent STI transmission. To avail of our FREE condom postal service, contact us at 021-4276676 or info@sexualhealthcentre.com. If you are using sex toys, ensure that they are washed before and after use. For more information, check out our #SafeRsex campaign: www.sexualhealthcentre.com/news/2020/3/30/safersex-campaign-highlights-precautionary-measures-required-during-covid-19-outbreak

Activity 1 - Love Languages Quiz

People have different ways of expressing themselves, which can cause confusion when it comes to communicating our affection. The 5 'Love Languages' can help you to identify the cause of this confusion and communicate more effectively with a romantic partner.

Answer the questions below to discover your and your partner's love language.

1. I feel most loved when:

- A** People say nice things about me
- B** People do things to help me
- C** People show they are thinking of me by getting me a small gift
- D** People want to spend time with me
- E** I get a loving hug or embrace from someone I care about

2. When you are celebrating your birthday, which of the following sounds best to you?

- A** I want everyone in my life to write me a special birthday card
- B** I want someone to do all of my chores and errands for one week
- C** A birthday gift especially picked out for me
- D** No one needs to buy me anything, I just want to spend time with the people I care about
- E** A nice shoulder massage or big hugs from everyone I love

3. My ideal day is:

- A** Having a long, deep conversation with someone I care about
- B** Getting things done or doing a special project
- C** Going shopping!
- D** Spending leisurely time with friends and family
- E** Getting a massage

4. I show I appreciate someone by:

- A** Saying nice things to them
- B** Doing something nice for them
- C** Buying someone a token of appreciation
- D** Spending the afternoon with them
- E** Giving them a high five, fist bump or hug

5. When I have a bad day, the thing that would help me most is

- A** Commiserating and talking it through with someone I trust
- B** Having someone make me dinner
- C** Treating myself to that special item I have been wanting
- D** Spending time with loved ones or friends
- E** A big hug

Activity 1 - Love Languages Result

One of the 5 Love Languages will bring you more satisfaction than the others. Check which letters you chose in your Love Language Quiz above, and compare below. Discovering your partner's language and speaking it regularly will help you to maintain a healthy relationship.

For more information: www.5lovelanguages.com/quizzes/



Mostly 'A's - Words of affirmation:

Using words to build up the other person, and verbally communicating in a positive way
e.g. "Thanks for doing the washing up." rather than "It's about time - the place was in a state."



Mostly 'B's - Acts of service:

Doing something for the other person that you know they would like.
e.g. cooking a meal, washing dishes, vacuuming floors, are all acts of service.



Mostly 'C's - Receiving gifts:

Showing the other person you were thinking of them.



Mostly 'D's - Quality time:

Giving the other person your undivided attention.
e.g. taking a walk together or sitting on the couch with the TV off – talking & listening.



Mostly 'E's - Physical touch:

Holding hands, hugging, kissing and sex, are all expressions of love.

Activity 2 - Affirmation Inventory

During a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a common response is to become more critical of yourself and others. Sit down with your partner and reflect on all of your positive traits as individuals, following the steps below.



Self-affirmation

Make a list of all of your positive attributes, and anything that makes you proud to be you.



Affirmation of your partner

Make a list of all of your partner's positive attributes, and the reasons that you admire and love your partner.



Exchange, assess and respond

Swap lists and embrace your partner's response regarding both of your positive traits.

Activity 3 - Schedules

If you and your partner have different priorities regarding your daily schedules, it may be useful to alternate days between your respective preferences. For example, your preferred method of relaxation after a long day may be to spend some time alone, but your partner may prefer to chat together in order to unwind. Follow the steps below to ensure that both of your needs are met in equal measure, and also to allow you to actively engage and be generous with your partner.



Alternate days

Choose which days you and your partner will follow **your** preferred schedule or undertake a certain activity of your choice, and which days you will both follow **your partner's** schedule.



Schedule your preferred activities

Plan whatever you and your partner would like to do on your allocated days.



Provide acts of service

Generosity is important in a romantic relationship. Be generous in your commitment to your partners allocated days. Engage fully in the activity they have chosen, respect their preference to spend time alone, and abide by their schedule, whether that schedule includes quality time as a couple or not.

Useful contacts and resources



Cork community

The Sexual Health Centre is part of Cork's Sexual Health Network. At the network's website "www.mysexualhealth.ie", you can find information on the Cork-based organisations that provide services related to sexual health, sexuality, relationships and wellbeing.

- www.mysexualhealth.ie
- www.sexualhealthcentre.com
- <https://youtu.be/EKSKh44aFT0> (HSE Cork Kerry Community Healthcare)



Young people

The Sexual Health Centre's Health Promotion Team is available to support you (free of charge) in relation to your relationships, identity and health. Contact our team at: education@sexualhealthcentre.com

- www.spunout.ie/life/category/life-dealingwithrelationships



Parents

The Sexual Health Centre's Health Promotion Team is available to support you (free of charge) in communicating age-appropriate information to your children regarding sexual health and relationships: education@sexualhealthcentre.com

- www.sexualwellbeing.ie/for-parents/resources

Useful contacts and resources



Crisis pregnancy

The Sexual Health Centre offers free counselling to anyone who has experienced a crisis pregnancy, termination, foetal abnormality or fatal foetal abnormality. Counselling is also available following the pregnancy, regardless of the outcome of the pregnancy. Contact our crisis pregnancy counsellor at **evelyndickinson@sexualhealthcentre.com**

- **www.myoptions.ie**



Marginalised communities

The Sexual Health Centre offers free support to all marginalised groups. Contact our Outreach Worker, Susan at: **susanwalsh@sexualhealthcentre.com**



Sex worker community

The Sexual Health Centre's Outreach Worker is available to support you (free of charge). You can contact Susan at **susanwalsh@sexualhealthcentre.com**. To avail of our free condom postal delivery, just ask for "the bag" - you do not have to identify as a sex worker/escort over the phone. A variety of condoms and a suitable quantity will be sent to you. Have a look at our #SafeRsexwork campaign for more information: **www.sexualhealthcentre.com/news/2020/4/9/the-sexual-health-centre-launches-safety-guide-for-sex-workers-during-covid-19**

- **www.uglymugs.ie/covid-19/health**
- **www.sexworkersallianceireland.org**

Useful contacts and resources



LGBTQIA+ community

The Sexual Health Centre's LGBTQIA+ Advisor is available to support you (free of charge) in relation to your relationships, identity and health.

You can contact Jack at: jackfitzgerald@sexualhealthcentre.com

- www.gayproject.ie
- www.linc.ie
- www.facebook.com/genderrebelscork
- www.teni.ie



HIV community

The Sexual Health Centre offers free counselling and practical mentoring to anyone living with HIV, as well as their loved ones. You can contact our HIV counsellor, Mary at: marywilkins@sexualhealthcentre.com. For practical support, contact Phil at: philcorcoran@sexualhealthcentre.com

- www.sexualwellbeing.ie/sexual-health/sexually-transmitted-infections/information-on-hiv
- www.facebook.com/ACTUPCork
- www.hivireland.ie/living-with-hiv/hiv-and-covid-19

Useful contacts and resources



People with disabilities

The Sexual Health Centre offers free support and advice for people with intellectual disabilities navigating their relationships and sexual health.

Contact our Senior Health Promotion Officer at:

philcorcoran@sexualhealthcentre.com

- www.rte.ie/lifestyle/living/2018/1208/1016129-intimacy-illness-and-disability
- www.nda.ie/Disability-overview/Key-Policy-Documents/Report-of-the-Commission-on-the-Status-of-People-with-Disabilities/A-Strategy-for-Equality/A-Strategy-for-Equality-Report-of-the-Commission-on-the-Status-of-People-with-Disabilities/Sexuality-and-relationships
- www.cheeverstown.ie/wp-content/uploads/Supporting-people-with-additional-needs-during-Covid-19-closures-Final-2.pdf
- www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk/downloads-shop/beating-the-virus



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If you need support, you can contact any of the free and confidential domestic violence services throughout Ireland - details can be found here:

www.safeireland.ie/get-help/where-to-find-help

- www.womensaid.ie/services/helpline.html
- www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/mental-health/domestic-violence-and-abuse.html
- www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/child-health/domestic-violence-and-abuse-during-pregnancy.html
- www.whatwouldyoudo.ie