



LESSON 3

Building Healthy Relationships

Student Learning Objectives:	National Health Standards:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define the terms “love,” “infatuation,” “sex,” “sexuality,” “sexual activity,” “abstinence,” and “sexual intercourse.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Core Concepts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe ways to develop healthy relationships with friends and family members, and healthy dating relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk with parents and/or other trusted adults about relationships and sexual issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpersonal Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the contributions healthy relationships make to the quality of life. (Optional Activity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Core Concepts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare and contrast different ways of communicating caring and love in different relationships. (Optional Activity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpersonal Communication

Lesson Synopsis

Review characteristics students look for in a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Describe various ways of showing caring and love in romantic relationships and with family and friends (Optional Activity). Define the terms “love,” “infatuation,” “sex,” “sexuality,” “sexual activity,” and “sexual intercourse” in small groups. Summarize the benefits of abstaining from sex and/or ceasing to have sex. Define “abstinence” and describe ways to develop healthy, lasting relationships. Discuss the benefits and barriers of talking with parents and other trusted adults about relationships and sexual issues. Assign homework to encourage communication with parents or another trusted adult.



Activity	Time	Materials Needed
Introduction	3 minutes	Supplied by the Teacher <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student-generated list of characteristics students look for in healthy relationships (from Lesson 2)
Optional Activity	20 minutes	Teacher Manual Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher Reference: “Different Ways to Show Caring” Slide Master: “Showing Love and Caring” Supplied by the Teacher <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projector and screen Non-permanent marker Slide Pens or pencils Writing paper
Input	15 minutes	Supplied by the Teacher <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student-generated lists of benefits of abstaining from sex and ceasing sex (from Lesson 2) Chart paper or slide and projector

Application	25 minutes	<p>Teacher Manual Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Worksheet: “I’d Like to Talk to You About...” <p>Supplied by the Teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pens or pencils • Writing paper • Index cards, eighty
Closure	2 minutes	<p>Teacher Manual Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Handout: “Characteristics of Healthy Relationships” • Student Handout: “Intimacy: The Real Road to Closeness” <p>Supplied by the Teacher</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students’ folders
TOTAL	45 minutes, or 65 minutes with the Optional Activity	

Preparation

- Prior to the Lesson**
- **Review the information on family worksheets** provided in the Introduction to this module.
 - **Read** the teacher reference, “Different Ways to Show Caring,” and **decide whether or not to conduct the Optional Activity**. If you choose to conduct the Optional Activity, this lesson will probably take two days to complete.
 - **Decide how you will divide your class** into groups with four or five students in each group for Input and Application, and for the Optional Activity if you choose to conduct it. Assign students in a manner that ensures a balance in skill levels and gender.
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- For Introduction**
- **Create a slide or chart** using the student-generated lists of characteristics students look for in healthy relationships from Lesson 2.
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- For Optional Activity**
- **Prepare a slide** of the slide master, “Showing Love and Caring.”
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- For Input**
- **Create a slide or chart** using the student-generated lists of benefits of abstaining from sex and ceasing sex from Lesson 2.
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- For Application**
- You will be stapling or taping approximately eighty index cards to form an arch representing a bridge. **Prepare a bulletin board, or wall space, for the bridge building**. One option is to create the “bridge” over the door to your classroom.
 - **Duplicate** enough copies of the family worksheet, “I’d Like to Talk to You About...,” so that each student will have one.
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- For Closure**
- **Duplicate** enough copies of the student handouts, “Characteristics of Healthy Relationships,” and “Intimacy: The Real Road to Closeness,” so that every student will have one of each.

LESSON PROCEDURE

Introduction: Connect this lesson on ways to build healthy relationships with the previous lesson which introduced the risks of sexual intercourse.

3 minutes

Instructional Steps	Script and Detailed Directions
Refer students to the location where you have displayed the slide or chart of characteristics they look for in a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend.	<p>Read some of the characteristics as examples.</p> <p><i>Giving thoughtful consideration to what characteristics are important to you is the first step in finding a healthy, responsible relationship. In any relationship, communication is an essential element.</i></p>
Introduce the topic of this lesson on building healthy relationships.	<p><i>Today, we will develop a common language to use when talking with others about sexual issues and find ways to build healthy, responsible relationships without having sexual intercourse.</i></p>



If you choose to conduct the **Optional Activity**, insert it here. See the teacher reference, **“Different Ways to Show Caring.”**

Input: Define the terms “love,” “infatuation,” “sex,” “sexuality,” “sexual activity,” “abstinence,” and “sexual intercourse.”

15 minutes

Instructional Steps	Script and Detailed Directions
Introduce the concepts “infatuation” and “love.”	<p><i>Relationships with boyfriends and girlfriends are varied. Some relationships last only a brief period of time, while other relationships last a long time. Some relationships between boyfriends and girlfriends could best be described as “infatuation.” Other relationships could be described as “love” relationships.</i></p>
Form small groups and define the terms “infatuation” and “love.”	<p>Divide your class into small groups with four or five students in each group. Assign the group roles of leader, recorder, and spokesperson.</p> <p><i>In your small group, define “infatuation” and “love,” and describe the difference. See what ideas you can come up with in four minutes.</i></p> <p>Gather students’ ideas by asking the spokespersons to report their groups’ ideas. Summarize to include the following ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infatuation: a short-term relationship that is usually based on physical appearance, sexual attraction, status, or personality; an intense attraction to someone new. • Love: a long-term relationship involving strong affection or liking and mutual respect. The relationship builds over time and is based on similar values, beliefs, interests, and personalities. The concern for the well-being of the other person, the willingness to help the other person, the level of trust and commitment is greater than with an infatuation. The relationship may begin as a friendship or an infatuation, but develops beyond these two types of relationships. Love requires sacrifice and faithfulness. It is not blind to the faults of the other; instead, it recognizes them and accepts the other person unconditionally. This type of relationship may lead to marriage.

<p>Discuss the differences between infatuation and love.</p>	<p><i>Do you think teens confuse these two types of relationships? Explain your answer.</i></p> <p><i>How do you think feelings of infatuation and love might change over time?</i></p> <p>Answers: Many times, infatuation will end as a new person becomes the object of desire. Other times, infatuation may mature into love as people get to know each other over time. Love tends to remain steadier over time because it is built on respect and commitment.</p> <p><i>For what reasons do you think it is helpful to know that all relationships are not alike, but differ in meaning and intensity?</i></p> <p>Answers: Expectations for one another may be different. Acceptable behaviors may be different.</p>
<p>Introduce and define the terms “sex,” “sexuality,” “sexual activity,” and “sexual intercourse.”</p>	<p>Write the following terms on the board: “sex,” “sexuality,” “sexual activity,” and “sexual intercourse.”</p> <p><i>The words “sex,” “sexuality,” and “sexual activity” often mean different things to different people. Perhaps this is one reason why communication about sex is frequently misunderstood. Let’s see if we can develop a common language so that we can discuss the prevention of HIV and other STIs and unintended pregnancy and the development of healthy relationships using terms we all understand. Take three or four minutes and define these three terms in your small groups.</i></p> <p>Gather students’ ideas by asking the spokespersons to report their groups’ ideas. Summarize to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex: means gender—whether a person is male or female. It is also used to mean the physical act of sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse includes oral, anal, and vaginal intercourse. • Sexuality: something you are born with. It is the sum of a person’s physical and social maleness or femaleness. Each person is a sexual being from birth until death, simply because his or her body has a reproductive system and hormones. • Sexual activity: behaviors that elicit or express sexual feelings, desire, or physical responses. Everyone has sexual feelings, desires, and physical responses.
<p>Discuss the differences between terms.</p>	<p><i>How do the terms “sexual activity” and “sexual intercourse” differ in meaning?</i></p> <p>Answer: Sexual activity can include oral, anal, and vaginal sexual intercourse, but also includes other behaviors which can express sexual feelings or desire, such as hugging and kissing.</p> <p><i>Using the word “sex” to mean sexual intercourse, how are sex and love different?</i></p> <p>Answers: Sex is a physical act that can be performed with or without love. Love is an emotion we feel toward someone else. In its most mature form, love is a commitment to another person that is constant, even though emotions fluctuate.</p> <p><i>If you think people can have sex without love, raise your hand. If you think people can have love without sex, raise your hand. Just because a person has sexual feelings, that doesn’t mean they must be acted upon.</i></p>
<p>Share students’ ideas about benefits of abstaining from sex and ceasing to have sex.</p>	<p><i>In Lesson 2, you listed benefits of abstaining from sex and ceasing to have sex. Here is the list.</i></p> <p>Show the slide or chart of benefits of abstaining and benefits of ceasing sex.</p>

<p>Encourage students to wait to have sexual intercourse. Define “abstinence.”</p>	<p><i>Many people who care about you want you to wait to have sexual intercourse until you are in a committed relationship, such as marriage. This is called “abstinence.” Abstinence is the only 100% effective way to avoid potential negative consequences, such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. At any time, you can choose not to have sex, regardless of what has happened before. If you feel you don’t have a choice, talk with a trusted adult.</i></p>
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Application: Describe ways to develop healthy, lasting relationships. Explain the purpose and expectations regarding the homework involving parents or other trusted adults.

25 minutes

<p>Instructional Steps</p>	<p>Script and Detailed Directions</p>
<p>Describe ways to develop healthy relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends.</p> 	<p><i>Relationships are important to the quality of our lives. In fact, they are too important to take lightly or to destroy them slowly.</i></p> <p>Ask the groups to rotate the group roles one person to the right so that there is a new leader, recorder, and spokesperson.</p> <p>Hand out eight index cards to each group.</p> <p><i>In your group, discuss what people do to develop healthy relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends. Some of your ideas may be similar to the characteristics you wrote in our last lesson. For example, listening to one another is a way to build relationships. Another idea is to spend time together.</i></p> <p><i>As a group, agree on eight ideas for how to develop healthy relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends and write one idea on each index card. In five minutes, I will ask you to share your ideas.</i></p> <p>After five minutes, ask the spokespersons to stand. Ask them to read one of their group’s ideas. Rotate from group to group until all the ideas have been shared. After each idea is read, ask the spokesperson to give you the card on which the idea is written. Place each card in the location you have designated for building the bridge. Repeating ideas is okay. All the cards need to be used as building blocks for the bridge. Complete the first layer of the bridge in this lesson.</p>
<p>Explain how developing healthy relationships is like building bridges between people.</p>	<p><i>We have begun to build a bridge. Bridges connect two different pieces of land that are separated by a valley or a body of water, such as a river. We will be learning how to build bridges between people...to make connections. While our bridge looks complete, we can add building blocks to our bridge to strengthen it as we go through this unit.</i></p> <p><i>While we have been focusing on relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends, these ideas for building healthy relationships work for relationships with friends, family members, and teachers.</i></p> <p><i>As we learn about healthy relationships, it might become clear to some of you that your relationships are unhealthy. If you ever have a concern about the way someone is treating you, please see me privately so that I can assist you in getting help.</i></p>  <p>For additional information and lessons about unhealthy relationships, refer to the Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education’s® violence prevention module, <i>Managing Conflict and Preventing Violence</i>.</p>

Discuss the benefits and barriers related to talking with parents or other trusted adults about relationships, abstinence, and preventing HIV and STIs and unintended pregnancy.

How do you think you might benefit from talking with your parents or another trusted adult about relationships, abstinence, and the prevention of HIV and other STIs and unintended pregnancy?

Gather ideas from students. Suggest the following if not mentioned by students:

- It will help to understand what parents or other trusted adults think about relationships.
- We can better understand the expectations and guidelines our parents and other trusted adults have for us if we talk openly and honestly.
- Adults' expectations and guidelines may be more realistic if their ideas and values are discussed.
- It will open communication about relationships so that students may find it easier to talk to them if they have questions or concerns.
- Parents and other trusted adults have a broad base of experience and can share what they have learned.

When you think about talking with a parent or other trusted adult about relationships and decisions regarding sex, what reactions do you have?



Many students feel awkward or uncomfortable. This question offers students a chance to express these reactions and offers you a chance to try to find ways to increase their comfort with homework involving parents or other trusted adults and to encourage them to complete the assignments.

What might be some barriers you need to overcome in order to be able to talk to your parents or other trusted adults about relationships?

Gather ideas from students. Write them on the board. Suggest the following if not mentioned by students:

- Embarrassment
- Difficulty finding a time when all parties, teens and parents or other trusted adults, are available
- Parents who won't communicate with their kids

Let's brainstorm ways around the barriers.

Write students' ideas on the board. The following ideas are examples:

Embarrassment

- Suggest a private time and place to talk.
- Explain that it is a class assignment.
- Select a parent or other trusted adult with whom you feel comfortable.

Difficulty finding a time when parent or other trusted adult is available

- Schedule a time that is good for both you and the parent or other trusted adult.
- Plan ahead and, if talking with a parent or another adult is an assignment, remember the due date.
- Be prepared when you meet so that time is used wisely.

Parents who won't communicate with their kids

- Start conversations with simple topics at first.
- Use homework assignments as conversation starters.
- Discuss movies and television shows that you watch together.

Once the subject is brought up and you become more comfortable, these conversations may become more frequent and more a part of everyday life.

<p>Explain the purpose of the homework.</p>	<p><i>Throughout this unit, you will be assigned homework. Some of the assignments you can complete on your own. Other assignments require you to talk with a parent or other trusted adult about what you are learning. All of the homework is required. You will get credit for the homework you complete.</i></p> <p><i>For the homework that asks you to talk with a parent or other trusted adult, you need not share the content of your conversations in class, but you do need to get a signature from your parent or other trusted adult to show that the discussion took place. The signed slip is documentation the assignment was completed.</i></p>
<p>Distribute the family worksheet, "I'd Like to Talk to You About..." and assign the homework.</p> 	<p><i>Tonight, you will have a chance to complete your first homework assignment with a parent or other trusted adult. The goal of the assignment is to learn a little about what dating was like for your parent or other trusted adult, to explore some of his or her thoughts about dating in today's world, and to discover or review expectations he or she has for you. You will also have a chance to share some of your thoughts about your dating relationships.</i></p> <p><i>This assignment is due _____ (date you will teach Lesson 10). Remember: You do not need to turn in any notes on your discussion, but you do need to return the bottom of the worksheet signed by a parent or other trusted adult.</i></p>

Closure: Review ways to build healthy relationships and introduce the next lesson on intimacy.

2 minutes

Instructional Steps	Script and Detailed Directions
<p>Share one way to build healthy relationships.</p>	<p><i>Tell the class one way you try to build healthy relationships.</i></p> <p>Allow time for a few students to share one idea with the class.</p> <p><i>Many of your ideas on the bridge reflect ways to communicate love and caring. However, communicating love and caring within a couple can get complicated. Our feelings are often intense. Our bodies react physically in different ways than with friends and family. We may feel sexual attraction and want to act on our feelings. If we do, there can be serious health consequences to consider.</i></p>
<p>Distribute the student handouts, "Characteristics of Healthy Relationships" and "Intimacy: The Real Road to Closeness."</p>  <p>Introduce the next lesson on the many aspects of intimacy.</p>	<p><i>Read these handouts and think about the characteristics of healthy relationships. We will discuss them in our next lesson when we will learn more about forming healthy relationships by exploring the many aspects of intimacy.</i></p>



Different Ways to Show Caring

If you choose to conduct the following Optional Activity, do it immediately following the Introduction and prior to the Input.

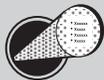
This Optional Activity is suggested for those students who have not had coursework on relationships with family and friends. If your students have covered this topic, you may want to summarize the content, use it for reinforcement, or omit the activity.

For additional lessons on characteristics of healthy relationships, implement the *Michigan Model for Comprehensive School Health Education's*® violence prevention module, *Managing Conflict and Preventing Violence*.

Optional Activity: Describe different ways of showing caring and love in different relationships, including abstinent ones.

20 minutes

Instructional Steps	Script and Detailed Directions
Describe benefits of having healthy relationships.	<p><i>Having healthy relationships in our lives is important. What are some of the benefits of having healthy relationships in our lives?</i></p> <p>Gather ideas from students.</p> <p><i>Healthy relationships are a major source of happiness for human beings. Without healthy relationships, our lives would lack warmth, caring, love, and contentment. We might feel lonely and apathetic, without passion or trust.</i></p>
Form small groups and identify ways to demonstrate love and caring without having sexual intercourse.	<p>Divide your class into small groups with four or five students in each group. Assign the group roles: leader, recorder, and spokesperson.</p> <p>Mention several of the student-generated characteristics of a healthy relationship that are synonymous with love and caring.</p> <p><i>Several of us think that love and caring are characteristics of a healthy relationship. In your small group, generate a list of ways people might show that they care for and love another person, without having sexual intercourse. Recorders, write your groups' ideas on paper. For example, being interested in the other person's well-being is one way love and caring are demonstrated.</i></p> <p>Allow two to three minutes for students to work together.</p>
Discuss ways to show love and caring using the slide master, "Showing Love and Caring."	<p>Display the slide, "Showing Love and Caring," so that the right-hand columns are covered. Compile a list of the students' ideas on the slide in the left-hand column. A sample list follows. Gather students' ideas by asking the spokespersons to share their group's list.</p>





	<p>Ways to Show Love and Caring:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be interested in the other person's well-being.• Help him or her.• Be reliable.• Be trustworthy.• Keep commitments.• Be honest.• Listen to him or her.• Spend time together.• Respect someone's decision to be abstinent.  <p>If you prefer not to use the slide, record any pertinent information on the board.</p>
<p>Compare and contrast ways to show love and caring in romantic relationships and with family and friends.</p>	<p><i>We were thinking of relationships with boyfriends and girlfriends. However, the theme of caring and love applies to many different relationships. Let's see how different types of relationships might compare.</i></p> <p>Display the right-hand columns of the slide. Go through the different types of relationships and place a check mark in the box if the behavior listed might be used to show love and caring in that type of relationship. The categories are friends of the same age and family members. You should have many check marks indicating similarities.</p> <p><i>Love and caring is very similar in many different types of relationships. There are also some differences. What might the differences be?</i></p> <p>Gather a list from students in the large group. Augment students' ideas with the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People do different things together depending on the relationship.• Friends change.• You choose friends; whereas, family is predetermined, decided by parents, or chosen for you.• People may want to spend more time with a boyfriend or girlfriend than they do with other friends.• People may think about a boyfriend or girlfriend when they are apart.• People may feel more depressed or angry when they break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend than they would with a change in a friendship.• People may want to be physically closer to their boyfriend or girlfriend than they would with other friends or family.

Continue with Input following this Optional Activity.



Showing Love and Caring

Ways to Show Love and Caring	Friends of the Same Age	Family Members



I'd Like to Talk to You About...



Directions:

- Discuss the questions on this worksheet with a parent or other trusted adult.
- No written responses are required, and you will not share your discussion in class.
- However, you and the parent or adult must sign on the bottom of the page to indicate the discussion occurred.

<p>For Parents or Trusted Adults to Share With Students</p> <p><i>Looking Back on High School</i></p>	<p>For Students to Share With Parents or Trusted Adults</p> <p><i>High School Today</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Approximately how many different people did you date or go out with at least once? 2. Of those, how many are still close friends with you? 3. At the time you were dating, did you think you were in love with the people you dated? 4. In making decisions about dating and related topics, what else do you wish your parents had told you? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How many different people do I think I will date or go out with throughout high school? 2. Of those, how many do I think will remain my close friends for 15 years? 3. With how many of them do I think I will feel in love? 4. In making decisions about dating and related topics, what advice do you have for me?

For Students to Discuss With Parents or Trusted Adults



1. What are some concerns or fears you have for young people today related to relationships, abstinence, and decisions about sex?
2. What were your parents' expectations of you regarding dating, relationships, abstinence, and decisions about sex?
3. When you were a teen, what was the biggest concern(s) that prevented teens from having sex?
 - not interested in having sex
 - fear of getting caught
 - focused on sports or academics
 - felt premarital sex was wrong
 - fear of unintended pregnancy
 - fear of getting HIV or another STI
 - other idea?





4. What do you think is the biggest concern(s) that prevents youth today from engaging in sex?

- not interested in having sex
- fear of getting caught
- focused on sports or academics
- feel premarital sex is wrong
- fear of unintended pregnancy
- fear of getting HIV or another STI
- other idea? _____



5. Do you think there are things in today's world that encourage young people to have sex? If so, what?

6. Who do you think young people today should go to for help with sexual issues?

7. What are your expectations of me regarding relationships, abstinence, and decisions about sex?

8. Was it easy or difficult for us to have this conversation? What do you think makes it easy or difficult to talk about these issues?



I'd Like to Talk to You About...

We have discussed the questions on the worksheet, "I'd Like to Talk to You About...."

Signature of a Parent or Other Trusted Adult

Relationship to the Student

Signature of the Student



Healthy Relationships

Include...

Respect:

- My partner treats me well in private and in public.
- My significant other likes me for who I am, even if I am different from him or her.
- My boyfriend or girlfriend listens to what I say, even if he or she disagrees.
- My partner understands my boundaries and backs off if I say I'm uncomfortable.

Honesty

- My significant other tells me the truth, even when it isn't easy.
- My boyfriend or girlfriend doesn't lie.
- My partner doesn't avoid telling me things because s/he is afraid I'll be upset.

Trust

- My partner doesn't lose his or her cool if I talk to someone else.
- My boyfriend or girlfriend might feel a little jealous now and then, but knows I won't cheat.
- Because my partner is honest, trust is growing.

Support

- My partner is there for me when I need a shoulder to cry on.
- My significant other helps me celebrate life's little victories.

Fairness and Equality

- My boyfriend or girlfriend and I take turns deciding what to do together.
- My partner hangs out with my friends as often as we hang out with his or her friends.
- My significant other doesn't try to get his or her way all the time.

Separate Identities

- My partner and I each have our own lives...our own families, friends, interests, hobbies.
- I don't have to pretend to like something I don't, or give up seeing my friends, or drop out of my activities to please my boyfriend or girlfriend.
- I feel free to develop my own new interests and friends.

Good Communication

- My partner and I ask if we're not sure what the other person means.
- My boyfriend or girlfriend and I speak honestly and openly to avoid miscommunication.
- I don't have to keep my feelings bottled up because I'm afraid it's not what my significant other wants to hear or because I worry about sounding silly.
- My partner is patient when I need some time to think something through before I'm ready to talk about it.

Characteristics of Healthy Relationships

Unhealthy Relationships

Include...

My partner doesn't keep promises.

My boyfriend or girlfriend gets angry when I don't drop everything for him or her.

My partner doesn't admit mistakes.

My significant other doesn't respect my opinions.

My partner criticizes the way I look or dress, and says I'll never be able to find anyone else who would date me.

My significant other interrupts me instead of listening to me.

My boyfriend or girlfriend keeps me from seeing friends or from talking to any other guys or girls.

My significant other wants me to quit an activity, even though I love it.

My boyfriend or girlfriend has broken things when angry.

My partner sometimes raises a hand when angry, like he or she is about to hit me.

My boyfriend or girlfriend tries to get me to go further sexually than I want to.

My significant other tries to control me by telling me what to do or not to do, what to wear, where to go and who to talk to.

My partner says it's my fault when he or she gets angry or jealous.

My partner humiliates me in front of other people.

My partner has hurt me physically or sexually.

Adapted from: TeensHealth. August 2005. Nemours Foundation. Online at http://kidshealth.org/teen/question/emotions/healthy_relationship.html



Intimacy: The Real Road to Closeness

Author – Natalie Aponte

Say two of your classmates had sex last weekend. They bared their bodies and shared the most personal physical acts. Were they intimate with each other?

Not necessarily. People often confuse sex and intimacy and that can lead to trouble.

So, what's intimacy? And why is it important?

"My boyfriend and I went out for 10 months and both of us were completely honest with each other," says Crystal, 17, from New Jersey. "We took time in the beginning of our relationship to get to know each other before trying anything physical, which helped us connect emotionally."

That emotional connection—the feeling that you're with someone who wants to know, understand, and respect you—is intimacy, explains Stephen Treat, director of the Penn Council for Relationships at the Department of Psychiatry, Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia.

Feeling Safe

"Intimacy is the ability to be vulnerable with someone and still feel safe," explains Treat. "It's when you can say, 'I'm sad. I miss you. I need more time with you.' And the other person says, 'Talk to me about it. I'm interested in who you are.' They don't come back with judgment."

"Intimacy happens in lots of different relationships—not just romantic ones. You can be intimate with your friend, your parents, and your sibling. But intimacy is an important part of a loving relationship," Treat says.

"Sex, on the other hand, is a physical act. It can be part of an intimate relationship, but sex, by itself, isn't intimacy," adds Treat.

"You can most definitely have sex without intimacy and intimacy without sex," says Dave Stratton, 18 of Pennsylvania. "You can be intimate with a good friend, sharing your deep dark secrets, and it will never develop into a sexual relationship. You can have a one-night fling and you've got sex, but no intimacy."

"I think it's best to have both, to be very close to a person, know you can trust them, and then have sex if that's what you both want," Stratton adds.

So, why is intimacy so important?

"It makes us feel loved, connected, not alone," Treat says. "It allows us to be who we are."

Sex: A Quick Intimacy Fix?

"People often think sex is the quick route to intimacy because it can make you feel desired and connected," Treat adds. "But that often backfires. The physical intimacy—sex—clouds your thinking about the person. It sometimes stops couples from really getting to know each other," Treat explains.

"The best relationships start with many other intimacies and sex becomes one of those intimacies," Treat says.

On the Right Road?

So, how do you know if your relationship is on the road to intimacy? "Ask yourself a few questions," advises David Weis, professor of human development and family studies at Bowling Green State University, in Bowling Green, OH.

"Does this person seem to be genuinely interested in me? Would this person be willing to wait to have sex? Will this person spend time doing different things—biking, watching movies, talking—with me?"

"Some romantic relationships are really not very intimate at all," Weis says. "They don't involve any real sharing."

Deciding to Wait

Marvin Hernandez, 17, from New York, and his girlfriend, Lauren, are learning about intimacy in their relationship.

"My girlfriend and I send each other a monthly card expressing what we feel, or we just hold each other," Marvin says.

"We had been going out for about seven months," Marvin remembers. "It was our first Valentine's Day together and we were watching movies at my house because I was sick. She turned to me and asked, 'Hey, when do you think we'll... you know?' and she giggled."

"I looked at her and explained that being this close to someone was extremely new to me and was as intense as we needed to be," Marvin says.

"I told her how it proved to me that she cared about me, just by being there, and that was all I needed for now. Sex is a big step. For us, I think it would diminish our closeness."

Sounds like they're on the road to intimacy.

National correspondent Cat Opderbeck, of Gladwyne, PA, contributed to this story. (Winter 2001)

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