***The 411 on Relationships***

***What Do You Want?***

Love, happiness, respect, trust and fulfillment, right? Well, it’s not always that easy. Relationships can be challenging and confusing. So it’s important to be clear on what you want and need.

**Here’s A Way To Start:**

Think of friends that you have had. What qualities were most important to you? Take out a pencil and paper and list 5 qualities you really want and value in a friend. For example, you might want a friend who:

* You can trust with your most private thoughts and feelings
* Is fun to be with
* Shares values that are important to you
* Supports you, even when you make mistakes

You get the idea. Your list will include the qualities to look for in *any* important, ongoing, committed relationship. These will probably be qualities that others will look for in you as well.

***How Do You Get It?***

**Know what you want**: Know what qualities are most important to you and don’t settle for less.

**Use effective communication skills:**  These include active listening and speaking honestly.

**Work at resolving conflict**: If you don’t get it “right” the first time (and you probably won’t), keep trying.

**Set up some agreements about your relationship**: You might agree to:

* Always be honest with one another
* Talk openly about your feelings with each other
* Be honest when there is conflict and pledge to work to resolve it
* Always bring up what is bothering you and not “stuff” things
* Talk openly about sex. If sex is part of the relationship, you’ll both be responsible for safer sex
* Be monogamous, if the relationship is sexual
* Maintain your autonomy in friendships and interests
* Any other things that are important to both of you

**What About Sex?**

If the relationship is one that might involve sex, don’t do it too soon. Make sure that both of you are ready for sex.

***Keep These Things In Mind:***

**Sex should be guilt-free**: If either of you is feeling uncomfortable, you should wait.

**Sex should be something you can discuss**: If you can’t talk about sex, you’re not ready for it; issues such as protecting each other, likes and dislikes, and what makes each other feel comfortable needs to be discussed.

**Sex too early in a relationship can actually prevent intimacy**: Sex at an appropriate time can build intimacy and deepen a relationship.

**Sticking With It**

We all know that relationships aren’t always easy. Conflict *will* develop. How you work through conflicts will help determine the future of your relationship.

Looking at the Stages of a Relationship

* **Attraction**: You are attracted to a person for some reason and want to know him/her better. It could be someone whose responses in class intrigue you; someone who “looks good” to you; someone you’ve talked to a few times; someone who appeals to you emotionally or for some other, unexplained reason.
* **The first step**: You take the risk of suggesting you do something together – have coffee after class, go to a lecture or concert together, etc.
* **Getting to know one another**: You start spending more time together. If it’s working so far, you both risk being more vulnerable by disclosing things about yourselves to each other. This stage tests the relationship and builds (or ends) feelings of trust in one another.
* **Conflict**: Sooner of late, differences arise. It may not seem like it at the time, but conflict is an *opportunity*. The relationship can stop and stay at this level, die, or grow deeper. The opportunity is that you have a chance to share fully and honestly the conflict you are feeling.
* **Working it out**: If you resolve the conflict, the relationship grows stronger. You realize you can get through the rough spots. You develop a deeper sense of trust and confidence in each other. If you don’t resolve the conflict, the relationship might end, or the conflict will just remain as a “sticking point.”
* **Deepening the relationship**: If the conflict is resolved, the relationship moves to deeper levels of caring. You have increased trust, affection, delight and pleasure in each other’s company.

**These stages are common to relationships: those between good friends, siblings, parents and children, students and mentors, and intimate couples. Each stage will be repeated over and over during the relationship.** Each stage can be a decision point: Do you continue this relationship or end it? Each time you choose to work through the stages in a positive way, the relationship deepens and the commitment between you is strengthened.

**When To Get Help**

How do you know when to seek help about a relationship?

Here are some clues to look for:

* You are feeling stuck for a periods of time or the relationship doesn’t move forward.
* You are having the same argument over and over without resolution.
* You are crying, or feel like crying, a good deal of the time.
* You are obsessed with the other person to the detriment of school, your other friendships, and the other parts of your life.
* You don’t feel you can move forward and get on with your life after your relationship has ended.
* You are eating (or not eating) or sleeping (or not sleeping) excessively for an extended period of time.
* You feel overwhelmed.
* Your grades are dropping and you don’t really care.

**When To Get Out**

How do you know it’s time to end a relationship?

Questions to Ask Yourself

* Are you staying in this relationship because the other person needs you?
* Is the relationship going in directions that don’t feel safe or nurturing to you?
* Is there an unresolved conflict?
* Have you let all your former friends go because your girlfriend/boyfriend wants you to?
* Is your self-esteem reduced by this relationship?
* Is the person pressuring you to do things you don’t want to do (sex, drugs, skip class, lie to your family, etc.)?
* Are you being put down or harassed physically or emotionally?

Answering yes to one or more of these questions signals there’s a problem. Unresolved, these issues can grow and become even worse.

Seek help. Talk to someone you trust. If there is no resolution, you may want to get out of the relationship altogethher.

**How To Get Out**

Probably the only thing harder than getting out of a relationship is staying in it when you know it’s over. It isn’t easy to end a relationship, especially when you know the other person will be hurt.

These Actions Will Help

* **Be honest**: Be honest with yourself and be honest with the other person.
* **Be respectful**: State your feelings and intent to end the relationship clearly and compassionately. Don’t drag it out when you know it’s over; it will only become harder.
* **Be clear**: Don’t lie, find reasons to avoid the other person, be manipulative or play other games. Don’t expect the other person to guess what is going on for you. Be clear, honest and compassionate.

**Where To Go For Help**

If you need help with a relationship, here are some resources you can use:

* Go to your school health center and ask to speak to a counselor. They are accustomed to helping students with these kinds of issues. Individuals or couples therapy can be very useful.
* Talk to a faculty member or trusted friend.
* There are many self-help books on relationships available in the psychology/personal growth sections of the library or bookstore.

***Getting what you want from a relationship will take work and consistent effort but it’s worth it. Your relationships can improve by practicing your relationship skills. Good relationships can enrich your life way beyond the effort required to maintain them.***