

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS



When the COVID-19 lockdowns started last year, many aspects of our lives changed, and in many ways, we have adapted. Whether it's through technology or "unplugging" for some quiet time, people have found ways to work, connect, and keep their mental health goals in sight. It has not been easy for many people, and some have found it especially hard to maintain healthy relationships during periods of lockdown, physical distancing and other safety protocols implemented to slow the spread of the virus and rates of infection. If recent times have been tough on you and the people you care about, this guide to maintaining healthy relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic is full of tips to help you through.

What are the foundational characteristics of a healthy relationship?

By definition, healthy relationships bring out the best in people and help to make us feel good about ourselves. That does not mean everyone in a relationship will be blissfully happy, one hundred percent of the time. A healthy relationship is a lot like a secret family recipe, it requires the right balance of a variety of ingredients, plus a few "secret

ingredients" like joy, fun, and love. Here are a few of the main components of good, healthy relationships:

- At the top of the list are mutual respect with open and honest communication.¹
- Individuals in a healthy relationship should feel safe in their connection and physically safe at home.
- Both people should feel supported, but they should also feel autonomous enough to maintain the level of independence they are accustomed to and desire.
- Equality and compromise help keep things balanced even when you find yourselves at odds or disagree.

As you can see, many of the "ingredients" that go into a healthy relationship would fall under the categories of work and sacrifice. Still, we cannot forget to have fun in our relationships because that's the sweet treat that reveals itself to us when all of the above factors are working in harmony.

How could maintaining a healthy relationship help one live longer?

Our relationships, romantic or otherwise,

hold massive sway over our emotional and even physical well-being. In fact, various studies have shown the importance of social relationships and the health benefits too.² Good relationships, directly and indirectly, help reduce stress, encourage healthy lifestyle choices, increase our sense of purpose, and therefore our direction in life. Maintaining healthy relationships could even help you live longer. Despite the benefits, we tend to allow barriers to get in the way of us forming, maintaining and growing healthy through our relationships. Here's why:

1. We are prone to holding on to negative relationships

We tend to hold onto negative relationships that affect our health, whether they result in some power struggle or abusive discourse, or perhaps the partnership is one of untreated addiction and co-dependency.

2. We feel we don't deserve it.

Sometimes it's a deep-seated pain or trauma that prevents us from forming and maintaining healthy bonds with those we care about. In these cases, therapy may be necessary to break down those barriers that prevent an individual from seeking healthy friendships and/or wholesome romantic connections.

3. We are currently restricted to social "bubbles."

Beyond the above, we also must factor in the current restrictions on meeting with people outside of our social "bubble" as directed by COVID-19 experts and government bodies. Our social circles may have diminished for over a year, causing friendships to feel strained or as if they are on pause. Even as the

restrictions ease slightly, the rules around social distancing mean that life won't go back to what it was before the pandemic as quickly as we may have hoped.

How to achieve, maintain, and build a healthy relationship

Despite the difficult conditions encountered during the pandemic, there are plenty of things we can do to keep our relationships healthy, strong and thriving. Whether you are living together or apart, here are four small, everyday actions that can help to make a significant difference.

1. Have regular catch-ups.

Regular catch-ups with the important people in your life can help combat negative feelings and keep you emotionally connected. We're fortunate that technology gives us so many ways to connect with the people we care about, even during a lockdown. Whether it's video chatting, social media, sending messages throughout the day, or calling on the phone, make sure you choose a comfortable method for both parties.³

2. Participate in shared activities.

Games, cooking, watching a movie, writing a song, and taking an online course.

3. Send a care package, or write a letter.

One way to maintain some similarity of a physical connection is to send something nice to the people you care about most. Now's your time to get creative and thoughtful. From hand-written letters to care packages full of goodies, sending something tangible can give the people you care about a considerable boost.

Include some of their favourite things—snacks, stickers, a magazine or craft supplies—and encourage them to write back.

4. Make plans.

Create a shared document, Pinterest board, or calendar for a future project or event. Start planning that vacation or road trip you've always wanted to take. Launch a side hustle. Think about how you can celebrate an upcoming birthday or another holiday.

Tips on improving existing relationships

For many of us, maintaining healthy relationships in a pandemic means navigating the complexities of living together with friends, family, and children. Here's how to do that while maintaining some level of freedom and comfort.

Give each other space.

Give each other as much space as possible. A home situation that allows for each individual to work or "escape" to separate rooms during the day is ideal and should help maintain some level of privacy when working at home. Smaller spaces will take some work, creativity, and patience to create enough space for each other. When space is feeling like a shrinking commodity, it's time to consider finding alternative space, like outside on a walk or in the shower alone.

Use check-ins to stay on track.

Regular check-ins are helpful for couples, family members and friends who live together. These check-ins should cover several things, including your and your partner's emotional well-being, how you are feeling about the boundaries and expectations you have set for yourselves and each other,

what works, what doesn't, and how you can improve.

Set boundaries and expectations.

Things that work for one person may not work for that same person in a slightly different situation or even on a different day. That's why communicating boundaries and setting expectations is so helpful when we are living and working "on top of each other." Boundaries could cover anything from defining who gets what workspace, when the time for breaks is made, and when alone time is necessary. It may also require having time around the house that is entirely silent to aid deep thinking, research and study.

How and why we should remove unhealthy relationships from our lives

You may find yourself stuck in an unhealthy relationship during this pandemic, and the best option is for you to leave or otherwise remove this relationship from your life. Even if the connection is long-standing, it is essential to remember that a relationship shouldn't continue solely for the reason that it's been maintained for a decent amount of time.

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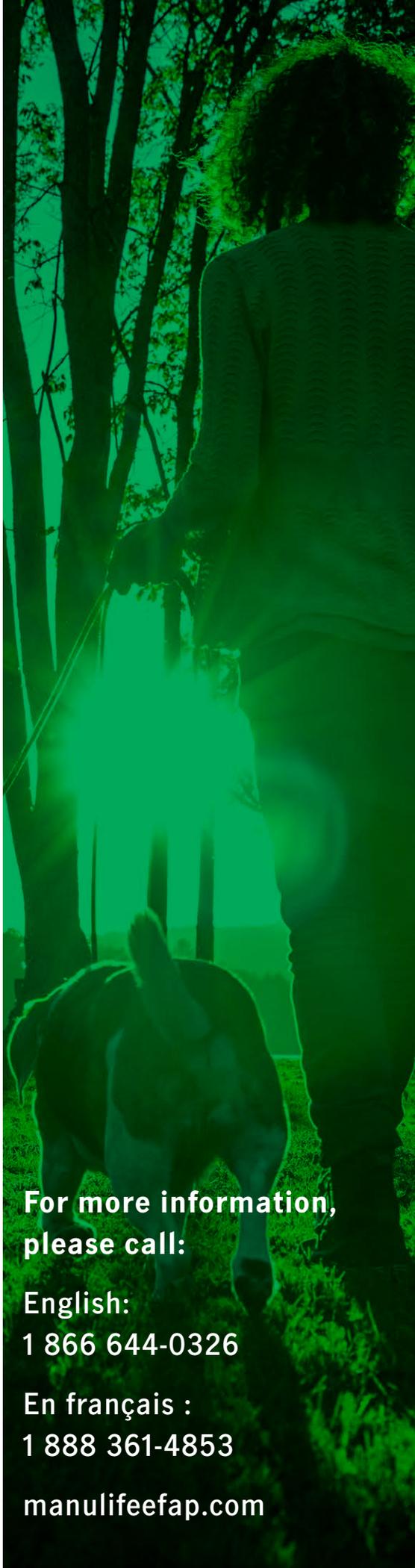
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- Make a plan.
- Break from the cognitive dissonance makes it harder to break free of bad relationships, especially long-lasting ones.⁴
- Being aware of the way your mind can play tricks on you can help you avoid this trap.⁵
- Ending a relationship can be a drawn-out and painful struggle, and not easily done alone. Gather a good support team to keep you on track and help you fill your life with healthy, positive activities.

In the end, all kinds of challenges will continue to present themselves as the COVID-19 pandemic and the fallout from the pandemic continue. No matter the living conditions, it can be a difficult time for everyone. It's also a time where having healthy relationships is more important than ever.

While we may be scared, we are also all in this together. Be kind towards yourself and those you care about. If you are struggling and feeling helpless, individually or relationally, please reach out to a trusted friend, counsellor, sponsor, or therapist for help.



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