



Figure 1: Characteristics of a healthy relationship



## UNHEALTHY AND ABUSIVE RELATIONS

There are a range of negative outcomes related to being in an unhealthy intimate relationship, such as substance use, academic difficulties, sexual health risks, stress, risk of developing anxiety and depression, risk of physical and sexual violence, and unplanned pregnancy. Youth intimate partner abuse (YIPA) is commonly reported by young Australians.<sup>(3)</sup> The long-term effect of YIPA can include decreased self-esteem, poorer academic outcomes, disordered eating behaviours, substance dependence, and poor mental health.<sup>(4-5)</sup>

Early intervention can reduce the negative impact that the unhealthy behaviours in a relationship can have on a young person.<sup>(6)</sup> Early intervention can support young people to recognise unhealthy relationships, build skills in problem-solving, decision-making, assertive communication, and self-awareness. As young people have less experience in navigating relationships and negotiating boundaries, they may need support from a mental health clinician or other responsible adult in their life. Early intervention can help young people avoid developing unhealthy relationship patterns and builds the foundation for healthy relationships in the future.

## WARNING SIGNS OF UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

While many relationships might feature some challenging aspects from time to time, unhealthy relationships will often have multiple warning signs that suggest a problem and abusive relationships will have patterns of unhealthy behaviours across time, which are characterised by a power imbalance and control. As a mental health clinician, it may be beneficial to explore warning signs with young people to help them to identify any risks that might escalate. These warning signs may include, but are not limited to:

- **jealousy**: for example, a young person might feel jealous when their partner speaks with others or communicates with friends and peers online;
- **quick involvement**, where the relationship is established quickly and may include 'love bombing', which can take the form of constant and persistent communication via texts or other messaging, sending flattery, or messages of praise. This often makes the person feel overwhelmed and unable to have freedom, sometimes young people may not recognise this as a warning sign and enjoy the attention;

- unrealistic expectations: for example, a young person might expect their partner to message back instantly, expecting a certain amount of sex or expecting the partner to be free immediately when they want to see them;
- monitoring communication with others, who they can communicate with and what they can talk about, or who they can have as friends on social media;
- isolation: this might include isolating somebody from family, friends and community, controlling who they see or talk to, for example, a young person might tell their partner they should spend less time with certain friends;
- rigid gender roles: this might include having expectations on how someone should dress or talk or what activities they can take part in, role and responsibilities around the house. It's important to note that gender roles and responsibilities are varied across cultures and lived experience;
- put downs: this includes using demeaning or derogatory language and making frequent negative comments about the young person's appearance or intelligence;
- any use of physical violence: this might include a young person pushing or grabbing their partner by the arm or wrist during an argument;
- emotionally manipulative behaviour: when abusive partners use silence as a form of manipulation, 'gaslighting', whereby the perpetrator tells false information and distorts the perception of their partner in the attempt to sow self-doubt and make the victim feel they are the perpetrator;
- sexual harassment or sexual violence, including pressure or coercion to complete sexual behaviours;
- controlling aspects of somebody else's life, including finances, clothing, cultural practice and appearance;
- a history and current use of violence towards partners or their family, friends or community;
- breaking or damaging objects, particularly their partner's belongings or property(7); and
- being violent or threatening violence towards their partner's family, friends, community and pets.

Some unhealthy relationship characteristics might be obvious and others subtle. Reassure young people that they have a right to access services to leave the relationship. Emergency services are also available to support if the person feels their wellbeing is at immediate risk.

**If they are at immediate risk of harm, they should contact emergency services.**

## COERCIVE CONTROL

Unhealthy or abusive relationships can also involve coercive control. Coercive control can include many of the behaviours discussed above but used in a strategic or patterned way by the perpetrator, incorporated and normalised into everyday life. Coercive control can be a predictor of physical violence.(8)

'Coercive control describes a tactical pattern of behaviours that are designed by the perpetrator to control, intimidate, create dependency, and render the victim powerless.'(9)



## HOW TO TALK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Many young people identify that they are in an unhealthy relationship and seek support from mental health professionals and services. It's important to listen, believe and support them. Other young people might not recognise that a relationship they are in is unhealthy or that it is impacting their wellbeing. They might see a mental health professional for reasons they believe are not connected to relationship issues. During adolescence and early adulthood, young people often look for acceptance among peers and friends. This makes it more difficult for young people to recognise unhealthy interactions or to challenge them when they occur, for fear of losing a relationship and the connection it offers.

In talking to young people about relationships that could be unhealthy, it might be helpful to:

- discuss the topic from a position of curiosity and non-judgement, for example, by asking the young person about the significant relationships in their life;
- explore the quality of the relationships the young person experiences and listen for warning signs and risk factors;
- explore how the young person perceives jealousy and controlling behaviours. Some young people might interpret these behaviours as a sign their partner cares about them. Take time to explore and help the young person build insight into how it feels when their partner(s) behave in unhealthy ways, including what they notice in their body;
- reiterate to the young person that they deserve to be treated with respect and that they should not feel pressured into doing something that makes them feel uncomfortable;
- inform young people that they are in a safe space and can choose to share their experience even if they feel embarrassed, ashamed and/ or afraid and that you will provide support to the best of your abilities. Also be upfront about referrals and any mandatory notification actions you are bound to, this will help establish trust with the young person;
- ask the young people to explore their ideas about healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships, and what would indicate to them if a relationship was unhealthy; and
- assure the young person that your service is confidential, including mandatory notification boundaries.

It can be difficult to work with a young person when they are involved in a violent and/or abusive relationship, as they might not be ready to end the relationship or fear ending it. While it is preferable to maintain engagement with the young person, there can be times when the safety of the young person requires intervention that impacts on the therapeutic relationship. If you are concerned about intimate partner violence, consider seeking secondary consultation with a family violence specialist. If a young person or anyone is at immediate risk of harm, contact emergency services.

Refer to **RESPECT** for more information about intimate partner violence or abuse, including safety planning.

If the young person has experienced harm, you will also need to consider your reporting obligations. These will vary depending on your state or territory, the age of the young person and their partner, and your professional obligations.

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## SUPPORTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Relationship violence can exist amongst LGBTIQ+ relationships and can manifest in the same and sometimes different ways. For example, threatening to 'out' their partner or deliberately misgendering trans and gender diverse young people.

Services to support victims and/ or survivors are often tailored for cisgender women and their children, making it difficult for some LGBTIQ+ people to access them. Clinicians can check with services how they integrate cultural responsiveness into their service. This might include going through formal process, such as Rainbow Tick Accreditation, or working with local LGBTIQ+ communities to improve the quality and accessibility of their services. Alternatively, clinicians might want to refer young people to relevant services who work specifically with LGBTIQ+ people. [The Safe+Equal Tip sheet to help practitioners responding to family violence provide LGBTIQ+ inclusive support](#) might be helpful for mental health clinicians working with LGBTIQ+ young people

Mental health clinicians should consider the cultural awareness and safety of services and supports for culturally and linguistically diverse or First Nations young people. Awareness of available services can help clinicians to have informed conversations with young people about the different services and support options including culturally specific options in their area. These might include culturally specific family violence programs and information from local Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations (ACCHOs).

## CONSENT

Mental health clinicians can also play a role in providing young people with education regarding consent. Help young people to understand that a person does not give their consent if they:

- feel pressured, afraid or threatened, for example, this might include a young person having a partner pressure them until they say okay;
- are unconscious or asleep;
- are alcohol or substance affected to an extent that they cannot consent;
- are misled about the nature of the sexual act or who they are having sex with; or
- never say or do anything to indicate consent or later withdraw consent.

## AGE OF CONSENT AND THE LAW

Young people need to have a clear understanding of the laws around consent and age. The law sets age limits for sexual acts, including sexual intercourse, sexual touching and sexual acts that don't involve touching. A person can be charged with a criminal offence if they perform a sexual act that breaks these age limits, even if both parties agree to it.<sup>(10)</sup> There are also laws that apply to sending or receiving sexual images or videos and recording sexual activity, which vary depending on the state or territory that the young person is in. Refer to the Australian Institute of Family Studies' [Age of consent laws in Australia](#) resource for more information.

## ONLINE RELATIONSHIPS

With the increase in use of technology and electronic devices, more socialising, education and recreation time is spent online. There are many benefits in being able to connect remotely to friends, especially in meeting others with shared interests and ideas. However, online relationships can also present challenges and risks to young people, including cyberbullying and image-based sexual abuse, whereby explicit images might be maliciously distributed or threatened to be distributed.<sup>(11)</sup>

When meeting with a young person to talk about online relationships, it might be helpful to:

Ask about their relationships with others online. They might be reluctant to share information, but reassure them that you're available if they need to talk about worrying behaviour or incidents that might have occurred online.

Discuss other ways to keep them safe online. For example, thinking about the images and content they share with others online and if they do send images, such as nude pictures, consider not including their face, identifiable features, for example, birthmarks, or identifiable places. Whilst highlighting if the person they send nude pictures to does happen to share the young person's pictures without their consent, it is not their fault – it's a crime and there are steps they can take.

Refer to the [eSafety Commissioner website](#) for more information related to online safety. The office of the e-safety Commissioner also can respond to reports of abusive behaviour online and offers other services.



## RELATED RESOURCES

- Working with adolescents: Keeping relationships in mind. Evidence summary. See: [orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/General-resources/Evidence-summary/Working-with-Adolescents-Romantic-Relationships](https://orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/General-resources/Evidence-summary/Working-with-Adolescents-Romantic-Relationships).
- Adolescent Romantic Relationships: Why are they important? And should they be encouraged or avoided? Evidence summary. See: [orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/General-resources/Evidence-summary/Adolescent-Romantic-Relationships](https://orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/General-resources/Evidence-summary/Adolescent-Romantic-Relationships).
- Promoting sexual health. Clinical practice point. See: [orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Physical-and-sexual-health/Clinical-practice-points/Promoting-sexual-health](https://orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Physical-and-sexual-health/Clinical-practice-points/Promoting-sexual-health).
- Sexual health and wellbeing. Online learning module. See: <https://lms.orygen.org.au/mod/sharelinks/opengraph.php?id=6301>

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria (FVPLS Victoria). Healthy Relationships. See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UL4fPxW-nBQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UL4fPxW-nBQ).
- Australian Institute of Family Studies' [Age of consent laws in Australia](#) resource sheet.
- Crushed but okay. [crushedbutokay.org.au/](https://crushedbutokay.org.au/)
- [eSafety Commissioner website](#) for more information related to online safety.
- Health romantic relationships. headspace. See: [headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/healthy-romantic-relationships/](https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/for-young-people/healthy-romantic-relationships/).
- Romantic relationships. ReachOut. See: [au.reachout.com/relationships/romantic-relationships](https://au.reachout.com/relationships/romantic-relationships).
- Safe+Equal [Tip sheet to help practitioners responding to family violence provide LGBTIQ+ inclusive support](#).
- 1800RESPECT is the national domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support service. See: [www.1800respect.org.au/](https://www.1800respect.org.au/).

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