

Hello, Sailor! How to Build, Board and Navigate a Healthy Relationship

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You probably hear the term "healthy [relationship](#)" a lot. People can make it sound like it should be easy-peasy to figure out what is and isn't healthy, but with people and relationships varying as much as they do, and a world that often romanticizes things that aren't healthy at all, it can be trickier than it looks. This is especially true when we're new to relationships and have little to no basis of comparison, or if the relationships around us -- like our families or those we see friends in -- aren't healthy themselves.

Whether we're talking about romantic or [sexual](#) relationships, both serious and casual, friendships or relationships with acquaintances, every part of a healthy relationship and this piece on them is a **we**, not an I or a you. Relationships are made of and by more than one person, so everyone in a relationship needs to be doing their part to make and keep it healthy. Mutuality in relationships and shared participation and responsibility are one of the landmarks of healthy relationships.

It can help to think of any relationship as a see-saw. If one person is sitting still on one end texting somebody instead of moving, the other person stays stuck at the [top](#) unable to move themselves; if one person gets off and walks away, the other person stays stuck on the ground, unable to move. In a healthy relationship that see-saw is in perpetual motion, with each person doing their own part. One person might come to a relationship better at one aspect than another, and that's okay; so long as everyone is gladly doing their own best and cooperating, our shared and different skills and talents help each of us grow and get better at even the parts we might not start out so great at. Relationships without those kinds of constantly moving see-saws are usually unhealthy, or often aren't relationships at all, but one-sided feelings and efforts.

Like love, relationships aren't something that exist outside of us passively, or "are" a certain way: they are how we and others make and [enact](#) them. They're something we and others actively do, not something we "have," or have happen to us. So, what do we do in healthy relationships? How do we make them what we want them to be?

We communicate.

In order to be in a relationship, we have to be interrelating. We can't do that without communicating, especially without talking, be that with our spoken (or signed, if we or others speak that way) or written words. To develop relationships that become deeper over time we have to get deeper in our [communication](#) and refine how we communicate. If the way we communicate is either short or largely silent, or pretty much stays on a "What's up?" "Not much, what's up with you?" "Not much." level, it shouldn't be a shocker that surface-y communication typically results in a surface-y relationship. And if we amp up the relationship in other ways -- like making it sexual or making long-term commitments -- but don't also increase our communication, that's one way we can easily create or enable unhealthy relationships. Our body language and any way we relate physically are also kinds of communication, but they tend to be far less clear and a lot more open to interpretation than our words are.

In new relationships, you may have experienced that for the first few dates, weeks or months, it seems like you and yours can't stop talking; that you're on the phone constantly, or spending days or nights together that are total babblefests. While that level of communication is so intense because you're getting to know each other, it's also so intense because it's new, and you're probably also not talking a whole lot about any troubles you're having with each other, which can be a lot harder and more scary to talk about. That NRE (new relationship energy) may also be driving you, and sustaining you so that

you feel like you don't need much sleep or other self-care that becomes so important as you incorporate your relationship into the rest of your life, and it can also obscure the need to really start communicating.

When communicating with someone, it's important to be putting out what we want, need and feel and to listen and respond to what the other person wants, needs and feels. Communication is about being a band, not two solo artists. We want to try to be [active listeners](#), to choose words to express ourselves with care and thought that are both truthful and kind. We want to keep in touch with each other about our feelings and our lives, especially the parts we're choosing to share. We also need to be communicating because we want to connect, not because we feel forced to or because someone else needs us to say things or keep in a certain level of touch in order to feel in control. Being in communication is not the same thing as anyone or a [partner](#) insisting that partner must always immediately respond when that person wants a response.

As our relationships develop we need to stay communicating throughout, about both the good or easier stuff and the tougher stuff. We need to share our joys and our woes with a partner, and to keep finding out more about each other. In a healthy relationship, we're openly communicating, including mutually sharing things that may challenge us or our partners, or may make us both feel more vulnerable or emotionally exposed. We also are making sure we are making enough time and space to really communicate: if and when our time is limited with someone, it may seem like we want to always put the fun stuff first, be that sex or going out and doing things, but ideally we want to strike a balance and make sure we invest just as much time to getting and keeping in touch with words.

We respect each other's limits and boundaries.

Everyone has limits and boundaries: the invisible emotional, physical and/or practical lines we draw between ourselves and other people simply because no matter how close we are to someone, we all remain distinct, separate individuals. Those limits and boundaries can be about things like how much time we have and want to spend with a partner, how much space we need for ourselves or with friends and family, about sex or our own physical space. Our boundaries and limits are also about the way we communicate (what words we use or what topics are just not up for discussion), how we manage conflict, about emotional or personal places we invite partners into and those we need to be off-limits, either at a given time or altogether or about objects or areas that we want to be ours alone, like a journal, a box of photos in the closet or our email. Limits and boundaries are also about how much of our [identity](#) is about us as a member of a relationship and about how much is about us all by ourselves.

That also includes self-respect for limits and boundaries, and putting limits and boundaries out there. If we pretend not to have any limits and boundaries, we don't do ourselves or anyone else any favors. People or relationships without any limits and boundaries are usually profoundly unhealthy and even dangerous to themselves or others. Limits and boundaries, and respecting each other's limits and boundaries, are one of the biggest ways we help assure everyone in a relationship is and feels emotionally safe, and one of the biggest ways we help assure a relationship is about the needs of everyone in it, not just those of one person.

While writing this, I asked our followers to tweet what words describe healthy relationships to them. Here's some of what they said: space, ethical, honest, loving, [autonomy](#), friendly, understanding, adjustable, careful, comfortable, strong-boundaried, communication, respectful, equal, celebratory, safe, fun, low-drama, sweet, caring, conversation, funny, silly, happy, pleasure, communication, shared, choices, thoughtful, uplifting, honorable, joyful, consensual, positive, endearing, proud, mutual, progressive, reflective, generous, evolving, kind, forgiving, affable delicious, understanding, love.

At the start of a relationship we're generally going to have way more limits and boundaries than we are if and as a relationship goes on over time and we've built trust and increased our level of comfort with someone. (Alternately, we may be more inclined to start a new relationship as if we or the other person has none, or be unassertive about having boundaries pushed.) But taking a relationship into the long-term never means people just drop all their limits and boundaries: we may relax them, but we're still always going to need some, and always going to need to respect those of our partners. It's also typical for limits and boundaries to be things we adjust, adapt and add or subtract over time. For instance, while at the start of the relationship we may have needed less time to ourselves, later on we may need more; while when a sexual relationship was new, we had some things we just weren't down with trying or doing, later on, we may be willing to and interested in adjusting that list. Setting limits and boundaries can sometimes be tougher at first, especially if we're worried about rejection or hurting someone's feelings, but as we get to know each other, it should get easier.

That also includes limits and boundaries with communication. Like we said, at the start of a relationship, you may stay in more constant communication than you do as a relationship goes on. That's normal, and it's no indication of a person becoming disinterested in their partner: it's just how things often develop as NRE becomes sustaining relationship energy. Just like we need ongoing communication for a relationship to be healthy, we also need personal space and we need communication to be about knowing and understanding each other and freely sharing our lives and feelings, rather than being about validation or control.

We pace ourselves, our agreements and our actions.

Many of us who have been part of romantic or sexual relationships know all about new relationship energy (NRE). That's that shiny, sparkly time full of rainbows and butterflies and i's dotted with hearts when everything is new and everyone is magically connecting. All the synapses are firing, and it can happen that a relationship barely in its infancy feels like it, or the feelings we have about it or someone, might last forever and ever.

In healthy relationships, we can still enjoy and honor those loopy feelings, but we also balance them with a reality check and perspective. Making big choices, or taking or pushing huge steps before it's really a sound time for them isn't healthy. Sometimes people feel like rushing things will cement a relationship they really want to continue, but in reality, things just don't work that way. A healthy relationship becomes more solid or continues over time because the people in it want it to and gradually build it together, not because anyone feels they should or feels obligated to because they made big plans or promises. Rushing things can also feel scary or suffocating and snuff what could have been a good relationship out before it barely gets started.

We should try to pace things in a way that allows for gradual development of a relationship, and for time for everyone to assess and discuss their feelings; time to feel out a relationship as we're building it before leaping to a level of the relationship we're just not at yet, even if we think we'd like to be there or might eventually want to be there, is usually pretty necessary. We wouldn't jump into or throw someone into the deep end of a pool before we knew we or they knew how to swim first, because we'd know if we did, they might drown. Pacing relationships is an identical principle. A relationship needs to learn how to swim first, only moving into deeper and deeper waters when we feel confident it's emotionally safe and sound, and when moving deeper doesn't feel like being thrown over a cliff when we'd prefer to be going down a small water slide.

For example, in the first week or two of being with someone we might think we can grow to love them, but love takes both time and knowing a person to develop. While an "I love you" really soon might still feel good (though it can also feel scary or strange), chances are that's happening too soon and someone saying it either doesn't really mean it, isn't recognizing that being in love isn't the same as love, or might be trying, intentionally or not, to emotionally manipulate the other person. Moving things

too fast can sometimes be about one or both people trying to artificially make a relationship solid before it actually is, or about people having fears that without moving really fast, someone will leave or reconsider. Discussions about or promises of live-in relationships or marriage within a few weeks or months are another example of moving too fast: if we don't even have a sound plan we've made and begun solidly on the path on for our own life, skipping ahead to how we're going to share that life with someone else is missing a whole lot of steps. Saying someone is our best friend when we've only been hanging out or talking for a week is pushing it. Sex before we've developed some basic communication skills and boundaries or a sense of our own sexuality all by ourselves, agreements of exclusivity before we even know if we want to be [exclusive](#) to someone, or a heavy focus on talking about a shared future when we barely have had a present are other examples of potentially moving too fast.

We make decisions that are about the relationship jointly and actively, and we honor our agreements and take responsibility for them.

One of the biggest rookie mistakes with romantic relationships many of us make when we first start getting involved with people is assuming we're all on the same page without checking in to see if we truly are, or deciding something by ourselves that's about more than just us (or letting someone else do that). For instance, the first time someone wants to be in a sexually or romantically exclusive relationship, and the other person maybe calls them a boyfriend or girlfriend, or says they love them, they often figure that's what the other person wants, too. But exclusivity is about making agreements, agreements that need to be made jointly and clearly. If we want to be exclusive with someone, we need to put that out there, ask what they want, and then talk together to either come up with an agreement that works for both of us (including what we mean by exclusivity). If we want two different things in this regard, we need to make decisions together about finding middle ground that works for both people, or parting ways if it turns out we just want and need very different things.

What keeps people from doing this most often tends to be the fear of putting something out there we want and finding out the other person doesn't want it. It's tough not to get what we want, after all, especially if and when our hearts are on the line. But it's ultimately tougher to find out assumptions we made weren't accurate, or to push someone into something they didn't really want or be pushed into something we didn't want. Just because we have feelings for someone or they have them for us doesn't mean a given relationship or [relationship model](#) is going to be the right one: just liking or loving someone alone doesn't mean we all want and need the same things. It tends to take time and more than one try for people to find others to get involved with that really suit both people.

On top of all that, part of what helps a relationship become solid and strong is the process -- not just the product -- of making and negotiating agreements, and on top of that, if any person in a relationship feels like they don't have just as much say, they can either wind up feeling like half a person, or more like someone's child than someone's partner.

One reason to make decisions jointly and actively is to assure that any agreements we make are agreements we and partners or friends want to make and agreements we all have thought about, understand the terms of and are confident we can honor. Telling someone you'll love them forever or marry them when you're 30 when you only know what 16 years of your life and six months of life with them have been like is an example of making a promise or agreement you're going to have a hard time knowing if you can honor. While we may really want a given agreement, rushing it or jumping into it without talking about the details just makes it more likely we or others won't be able to honor it.

If you want to offer up a promise of something you're not yet sure about, or a partner or friend wants you to, you can always offer them up a promise to listen to them talk about it, think about it yourself and to continue to talk with them about it: that's a promise you can certainly keep that also speaks to a commitment from you and a response to their desires.

We're flexible, and have realistic expectations of each other and the relationship.

People don't stay the same as weeks, months or years go on. If we're living and experiencing life, then we're likely also growing and changing all the time to some degree, even though the core of who we are often stays the same. Because relationships are made of people, the same is true of relationships. What your relationship looks and feels like at week one isn't the same as it will look or feel at month one or year one; people and relationships are always evolving and we can't know right from the start what will work or what they will look like along the way.

Being flexible involves things like understanding that the agreements we make sometimes need to be renegotiated or refined. It involves supporting and accepting that any of us may want more or less space or time apart from each other at a given time, may or may not want sex or a certain kind of sex, and feeling safe enough with your partner that you can bring up concerns or hear their concerns. Being flexible is understanding each of us processes information and emotions differently and that your timeline of talking or understanding might not always be 100% in synch with your partner's. Being flexible is about understanding that while we have control over ourselves, sometimes life throws us all curve balls which can change how much time we have, what our priorities are, what we're able to handle and what we need.

Having realistic expectations means understanding things like that one relationship can't and shouldn't provide all the things a person needs in life, including interpersonally, no matter how much people care about and like each other. Another part of being realistic about relationships is understanding that, honestly, sometimes relationships can be difficult. There will be tough moments, hard decisions to make, and probably some discomfort or misunderstanding along the way anytime we get close to another person. Relationships take practice, and as with anything we practice, we'll undoubtedly slip up along the way.

"But they said..." is a phrase we hear when talking with people about their relationships a lot. Like, they said they'd love you forever, they said they wanted to get married, they said they didn't like anyone else, they said they were going to have sex on your birthday or they said they could hang out on Saturday. Like we already talked about, making sound agreements at a sane pace and honoring them is a big part of healthy relationships, but so is accepting that sometimes situations, people or feelings change, and if and when those changes happen, we'll need flexibility and should expect the same flexibility of others.

We each get to be our own person.

Being in an intimate relationship isn't about giving up our own lives or enmeshing to the point that we can't figure out what our own lives are without someone else; it's about sharing our lives. How much or how little we share will tend to do with what each of us wants, what a given relationship is like and how open we feel to sharing.

While we'll often tend to have things in common with the people we're in relationships with, we'll also often have differences. Not only are differences okay, they tend to be one of the ways we grow in relationships. If we wanted to date ourselves, we wouldn't need to bother with other people, after all. Giving one another freedom to have our own interests, dreams and goals, do some activities alone or with others and to have a past, present and future that is about more than any one person is hugely important. Other interests can be especially important during times of conflict in any given relationship, so that we or others can feel supported, get good breathers and have healthy ways to process conflict or hard feelings. If we or others find that allowing that kind of freedom feels super-scary or threatening, then chances are we may need to slow down the pace of the relationship, work more on building trust, or do some self-work around insecurity.

Being our own person also means that even if we're so-and-so's boyfriend, girlfriend, best friend, partner, fiancée or spouse (or child or parent), it's understood by us and that other person that that is

one part of who we are, not all of who we are. We're also still the person we came to the relationship alone as and will leave it as -- however and whenever that may be -- even though the relationship may in some ways change or grow some of who we are. This includes we and our partners respecting who that individual person is and not expecting that we will change core characteristics about ourselves or drop our interests just because they are not what the other person likes or expects.

Allowing others to be their own person means embracing things about other people that are different from us: like, how someone dresses, how they talk, what they like to do with their own free time, what their personal beliefs are. In any relationship, chances are good that there are at least a few things one person is interested in, likes or feels comfortable in, but the other is not. When that happens, that doesn't mean anyone has to stop pursuing their own interests or do things they don't like at all: rather, it just means time and space need to be allowed for folks to do their own thing separately, to figure out ways to enjoy what the other person does in a way that works, or that someone needs to work on accepting who it is they are in a relationship with, remembering that the person they love includes parts of that person they may not connect with perfectly or understand.

We know that people aren't fixer-uppers.

Understanding and accepting that we're each our own person is also about our own responsibility and what we can control -- and should not be trying to control. While a relationship is a mutual endeavor, any of us are ultimately only responsible for ourselves and can only control ourselves. We need to understand that and also accept that about any other person we're in a relationship with. Healthy relationships aren't about people trying to bend someone else to their will to get what they want or be who they want them to be, or about trying to make someone be like us or be inseparable from us: they're but about people coming together and staying together because each wants to, creating something shared with the places we do intersect, understanding and accepting there are some areas where we won't.

In healthy relationships, we accept one another as we are and we feel accepted for all of who we are, past, present and also in terms of who we'd like to become. No one should ever have to feel they need to pretend to be someone they're not, or like they need to change the core of who they are in a relationship. If and when we find that we're in a relationship with someone who just really isn't the person we need or want in that kind of relationship, it's not that person's job to change who they are; it's ours to recognize either our own needs have changed, or that our ideas of who a person was weren't accurate, and that we need to take our own action by moving on to seek out people who can meet our needs better or who are better for us.

During all of our lives, we'll all have some growing to do and some ways we want to grow. Relationships can also challenge us sometimes, and issues any of us may have with things like trust, communication, self-esteem may pop up or become evident in the course of a relationship. It may be that we need to work on things like that to improve our relationships, both the important relationship we have with ourselves and the relationships we have with others. But if and when anyone is going to try and do some changing, it really needs to be something that person wants to do for themselves, too, not just for someone else. Any change any of us try to make solely for others usually ends with failure and hurt feelings.

On the flip side, that also means that we should not expect partners to be able to "fix" us. Our friends, family or romantic/sexual partners can and should certainly be a support to us, a helping hand when we need an extra one. But what they aren't are our therapists or counselors, or our corrective experiences. A partner or friend can't be expected to do the work on ourselves that we really need to be doing: they can support us in our own growth and change, but they can't do that for us, and we shouldn't be trying to do someone else's growth work for them, either. It's always wise to be honest

with yourself about what you want and need, and be willing to work on your own stuff and not expect someone else to do that work for you.

We trust each other.

The word trust gets thrown around a lot with the assumption everyone understands what it means. Like "love" it can actually be a murky concept. What trust is is a firm reliance on the integrity, ability, or character of a person or thing; to have or place confidence in, to believe. Trust is also something to be earned, extended and built, not something to be proved. We can't demand someone else trusts us: we can only prove ourselves to be trustworthy, extend trust ourselves and give that person the choice to place trust in us if they want to, understanding that for healthy people, that often takes time.

When we trust each other, we believe what each of us says we feel and do. We feel our private and personal information and lives are in safe keeping with another person, that that person won't betray us or our confidences. We have faith in each of us doing our best to keep and honor our agreements. We feel we can depend on one another, and feel confident that we and a partner are people of integrity and good character. When we trust each other, we allow one another freedoms and accept that not only can we not know what someone else is doing 24/7, but that we shouldn't need to know that if we trust someone.

"You don't trust me." If and when you or someone else is saying that, check in. Has there been enough time to establish trust yet? If not then "No, not yet, I need more time for that," is a sound answer. Has someone given you sound reason NOT to trust them? If so, you may want to scale back the relationship while you rebuild trust or figure out if you even want to. Sometimes people say that to try and manipulate or control, or as a way to evade personal responsibility. If there has been enough time to build trust, and a person has been trustworthy, might you need to do some work on your own issues with trust before getting this close?

Some people will say they trust a given person or people completely right from the start. What they usually mean when they say that is that they don't have limits or boundaries, that they're engaging in some kind of denial or are just not taking care of themselves. Trust is built gradually, just like the whole of a relationship. What's healthy with trust is to each be extending little bits of it at a time, such as by sharing personal information, making smaller agreements, and then expanding that trust more and more as we show each other that we are can both trust and be trusted. We wouldn't trust someone who just walked up on the street we'd never seen before who asked if they could hold our wallet for a minute just because we liked the looks of them or they seemed to like us, so it doesn't make any sense to do that with our hearts and lives, either, far more valuable things than a few bucks and a driver's license.

We value each other's outside relationships.

Most of us have more than one person in our life who's valuable to us; we have more than one important relationship. The idea that one relationship is more important than all others, or should be, is a barrier to healthy relationships and a life rich with a wide array of connections with other people who care about us and who we care for. That idea is really pervasive with any kind of romantic relationship: everywhere we look we can see the (dysfunctional and kind of creepy) suggestion that a marriage or romance is THE relationship, to be held above all others, but that not only typically comes from a not-so-great agenda, it also doesn't speak to the reality of most people's lives. For instance, a parent likely doesn't privilege their relationships with their children or their relationships with a co-parent over each other, but instead sees them as equally important, albeit different. Our closest friends are usually just as dear to us and integral to our lives and who we are as our romantic and/or sexual relationships are.

One thing this goes back to is making sound agreements. If you or someone you are in a relationship with is asking anyone to always put one relationship first, no matter what, or are trying to limit who someone else is connected to, that's not healthy. It's one thing to ask for something like an agreement about dating exclusivity, but it's something else entirely to ask someone to agree not to talk to people because you worry that person does or might have or develop sexual feelings. If you or someone you're in a relationship can't accept and handle each of you having other equally important people in your lives, or are overcome with jealousy about other relationships, that's a problem for that person to work on for themselves, and to work on by doing some kind of therapy or growth work of their own. Working feelings like that out in a healthy way does not involve trying to isolate a friend or partner from the other people in their lives to manage your own insecurity for you.

When we sustain any relationship over time, one thing we tend to do is to bring someone we're close to into the network of our other relationships, and have them be part of our self-made family and community. Healthy relationships don't tend to be compartmentalized, intentionally separated from that larger network, but instead, become a part of it, and that network is something any of us should be viewing as a positive. After all, when we care for people in a real way, we don't want them to be isolated, because isolation really sucks: instead we want them to be surrounded by as many people who care for them the way we do as much as possible.

We're equals.

In healthy relationships, we think of each other as equals, and treat one another as equals, even if there may be ways in which the world doesn't see us that way. Parents have more rights than their children under 18 do. A friend who is of a higher economic class than another has more privilege, a friend who is [gay](#), [lesbian](#) or trans [gender](#) isn't treated as well in much of the world as the friend who is straight or [cis gender](#). An older romantic partner often has more power in the world-at-large than a younger one; a male partner may have more freedoms than a female partner. While no relationship can fix those inequities at-large, within a relationship itself, we can and should treat and think of one another as equals, even when law, policy or culture does not. Even if, for example, parts of the world think women are second-class citizens, someone a woman is in a healthy relationship with doesn't think that.

Being equals also means we all have equal say in a relationship, that decisions in the relationship are being made in a shared way, not by just one person.

Some relationships are mentorships, rather than other types of relationships: relationships in which it's a given, or part of the design of a relationship that while, at the core, we feel equal, we know one person has something big to teach the other. Parent-child relationships are, in part, mentorships. Healthy mentorships involve a forthright understanding of this dynamic, and involve limits and boundaries that respect that kind of difference and account for the power imbalance it can involve: this is why schools and states have laws and policies around a high school student and a teacher dating. If you or someone else find yourselves in a relationship that's not supposed to be a mentorship, but that someone is presenting as one in some ways or which feels like one -- like an older partner saying they have so much they know that you don't -- and also doesn't have the kinds of boundaries to make a mentorship healthy, do a reality check to be sure everyone involved really thinks of each other as equals.

We address and resolve conflict soundly.

Here at Scarleteen, we'll often hear users say things like, "We fight a lot, like most couples, it's normal." The thing is, in healthy relationships, fighting is usually rare. It's common for people in relationships to have disagreements or conflicts, for sure, especially in relationships where people live together or share lots of responsibilities, but minor arguments or even big disagreements that may take some time to work out aren't the same thing as fighting. And when you don't cohabitate or share a lot

of responsibilities, when you're just dating or friends, conflicts should be seriously minor and infrequent.

In healthy relationships, people work through conflict in ways that are compassionate, caring and respectful. Yelling or screaming only communicates someone is angry: it doesn't tend to communicate why very well, help people to work that anger out together or nurture a space where everyone feels safe. Instead of yelling or screaming, giving someone the silent treatment, talking trash to friends or other cruddy ways of expressing conflict, we need to work together on expressing conflict well and then work on resolving it. That usually means sitting down to talk through conflicts as calmly as possible, without blaming, name-calling, expecting immediate results or just trying to short-cut with apologies or excuses without actually resolving anything.

Sometimes it's hard to be calm if we're really upset or scared: but even when conversations are very emotional or tense, we can still work things out. That might mean each taking some time to go be by ourselves with an agreement to come back and talk together after we can process our own feelings separately. When we're working out conflicts in discussions, we need to all do our best to be [active listeners](#), to use "I" statements -- such as "I feel upset because..." rather than "You make me upset because..." -- and doing the best we can to comfort each other throughout, be that by holding hands or sitting close, or by respecting someone's need to have some space in between. With bigger conflicts, we often need to accept it may take a few discussions or some time to really work things out and make time together for those discussions. Resolving conflicts or differences is a process, so we may need to accept that someone is going to try to do something differently, rather than expecting enormous changes all at once.

It's also important people close the door on conflict well, even if it's still being worked on. If and when we argue or have a tough discussion, we and others should try and leave it, or leave where we're at with it, in a way that leaves everyone feeling safe and cared for. That's doing things like thanking each other for taking the time to talk, affirming that we care about and respect each other, and/or spending time doing something together where we can easily chill and reconnect, despite the conflict. Ending a disagreement or conflict with a silent treatment, emotional [withdrawal](#) or rough words isn't healthy or caring.

You may have heard people on talk-shows and in self-help books say that a relationship takes work. That's true, but it's not the same kind of work as, say, your temp job. It's more like the kind of work you'd put into a poem you really want to write, a long hike on a nice day or an activist project your heart is in. We have to keep putting energy and effort into relationships, but for the most part, a healthy relationship between people who generally get along, have a good deal in common, and want the same kinds of things really shouldn't feel like work-work; it should involve more play and times of peace than work, and a generally easy effort most of the time. If keeping a relationship going or being in it feels like a constant, grueling effort to anyone, it's probably time to either move on, or change the model of the relationship to one that feels like a better fit.

We are safe.

In a healthy relationship, no one involved should be emotionally, physically or sexually unsafe from the person they're with. None of us should be at risk of being called names or put down, harassed or stalked, punched or kicked, forced or coerced (pressured) to do anything they don't want to do sexually or affectionately. We should also feel safe, and secure in the idea that our partner would never do us harm intentionally, and that we would never cause them harm on purpose, either. If we are not safe in those basic ways or don't feel safe, our relationships are likely [abusive](#) or are becoming so.

This also means it's up to everyone in a relationship to be sure they are safe to be with. The responsibility for safety doesn't just lie with a person in harm or potential harm, but with everyone. If you or a partner feel like you have real troubles with control, anger, jealousy, dependence or self-esteem, then it's that person's (or yours) responsibility to know they aren't in the right space to be in an intimate relationship and to do whatever work they need to for themselves, alone or with the help of a counselor or other helper first, before getting close to someone else. Because sometimes we or others don't know we have these issues until we have gotten close to someone, that can mean either taking a break from a relationship or breaking up altogether, even if and when we really care about someone.

None of us are always in the best headspace, time or place in our lives, or situation for an intimate or close relationship, or for a certain kind of relationship or relationship model. For example, even if we may be earnestly safe in a relationship, we may not be able to feel safe yet because we grew up with abuse or are still healing from previous abuse. We may still be getting over a past relationship and need more time to process that and what we now want in relationships moving forward before we jump into another. We may be dealing with a tough spot in another relationship in our life that needs our time and attention, and that a new or different relationship would just be a distraction from or a way to try and avoid what's going on in our lives. We may be dealing with an addiction, illness, loss, a major change of life coming, or something else that really requires an in-depth dedication to own self-care. The onus is on everyone either entering into a relationship or deepening a relationship to do the best we can to check in with ourselves and be sure we're only getting as involved as we're ready for, able to handle, and want to handle.

We care about each other.

Not everyone uses the L-word, especially early in relationships. That's okay, especially because ideally, when and if someone does say those words, they're expressing something they have already shown and do show in action, not just in words. If we're going to have any kind of intimate or close relationship with someone, we should still care about them. We may not be at love yet, or have a relationship that ever gets to love, but that doesn't mean we can't be caring and loving in how we treat one another.

To make more sense of what can sound pretty vague, let's pull up a couple paragraphs from [another article here](#) about love: bell hooks said, "Love is a combination of six ingredients: care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust." That applies to both how we care for ourselves and others. It may be obvious, but to her list I'd add connectivity: love is about connecting and being connected to ourselves, to who we love, to everything. There's an energy to being deeply connected that once you feel, you'll recognize ever after.

One thing we can all usually agree on about love is that the vast majority of the time, love makes you and everyone in it seriously happy. When we love and are being loved, we don't usually feel miserable, desperate, terrified, detached or lonely: love feels good. Love is active: it isn't this disembodied thing that's out there floating around we either get or we don't. It's something we and others feel because we actively and intentionally create and enact it. It's something we nurture, grow, practice and refine. It's something we make and do, not something we are given or take. If we lose it, it's not like losing our keys: rather, it's about one or more people no longer choosing to love; no longer actively loving.

We're Not Missing Pieces

We aren't completed by other people, because we are all whole unto ourselves. When we meet and get involved with someone we really cherish and connect with, that certainly can change us or our lives, but it's not like before we met them some part of us were missing. We -- and they -- were still all there, we just were without this relationship and without whatever parts of us the relationship may have helped to grow, change or enhance. Even though great relationships can change us and others

for the better, help us grow, and add valuable things to our lives, no one is really someone's "other half."

If you're a fan of children's books, Shel Silverstein's "The Missing Piece Meets the Big O," communicates this well. In that book, a "missing piece" goes looking for what it thinks is someone else it needs to feel whole and inserts or interlocks itself into all kinds of other characters, finding that never really works out or creates a feeling of completion, connection or autonomy. Finally, the missing piece meets The Big O, who makes clear it can't complete anyone, but it can roll along with someone else, and also that the missing piece can roll just fine on its own if it learns. Lo and behold, the missing piece learns just that, and winds up in relationship with and to someone else in a way that's healthy and sound.

Final Thoughts

Most of how we learn to have healthy relationships is by having them. We hope this article helps you out, and all the articles on the 'net, all the conversations with peers, all the things you see on TV and witness in your families -- all of these can help you understand what you want, what you don't want, and what some of the key ingredients are of healthy relationships. But in the end, we're all going to mostly need good intentions and practice: a lot of practice. A willingness to take risks without compromising basic safety, a willingness to listen to sensible advice, a willingness to grow and a willingness to believe oneself desirable and worthy of being loved -- these are the indispensables of pursuing healthy relationships.

We wish you joy, like and love on what we know will certainly be a challenging journey, but hopefully a journey, or a series of journeys, that enrich your life and who you are and want to become.