

Relationship Guideposts



Navigating and maintaining healthy relationships can be challenging, and even more so if you struggle with social skills. Using resources from Lutheran Social Services and autism community member feedback, AuSM developed the below chart that separates relationships into some key component areas and highlights how each component looks in a healthy relationship, an unhealthy relationship, and an abusive relationship.

Every relationship is different. Relationships may include signs from that cross over healthy, unhealthy, and abusive indicators on these charts. This can indicate the need for work in some areas. In contrast, an abusive relationship does not need to include every sign of abuse. Use these guides to help you determine if you feel safe and healthy in your relationships. If you are concerned that you are in an abusive relationship, please reach out to a therapist or call the Minnesota Day One Hotline at 1.866.223.1111.

Relationship Components



Responsibility

In all adult relationships, people need to be able to take personal responsibility. When you make a mistake you need to be able to apologize. When you have strong emotions, you need to take ownership over of them. And when you're part of a relationship, you need to be able to take on tasks and handle problems together. Responsibility allows both partners to contribute within a relationship.



Emotions

Emotions are a part of any relationship, whether we're having positive emotions towards our partner, or struggling with difficult emotions like anger, sadness, or jealousy. The way we manage our emotions and share those emotions with our partner can be respectful and cooperative, or damaging and unhealthy.



Independence and Control

Different people feel comfortable with different amounts of independence in their relationships. A healthy relationship allows both partners to feel comfortable with the amount of autonomy they have. A relationship in which one partner tries to control the other can quickly become unsafe.



Communication

Communication is a foundational part of all relationships. Strong communication skills allow partners to understand one another, manage their emotions, set and maintain boundaries, and work together to solve problems.



Responsibility

Healthy

Unhealthy

Abusive

Criticism

If you or your partner are having a problem or want something to change, you feel comfortable bringing it up. Neither person does so aggressively, and the focus is on solutions instead of blame.

Example: Your coworker has consistently been showing up late, leaving you with more work. You pull them aside after your shift one day and let them know that it negatively impacts you. They acknowledge this and commit to being on time.

When you do something wrong, they quickly point it out and won't let it go. They see deviations from their way as the wrong way.

Example: You drop a dish and break it in front of your boyfriend. For the next three months they won't stop teasing you about it any time you pick up a dish. You tell them it embarrasses you, but they say you earned it by screwing up.

Anything you do is game for criticism. No matter how you behave, they may yell at you, berate you, or tell you that you're a bad person for doing it. There's no way to please them.

Example: You're taking a nap and a family member comes in and wakes you up by yelling at you that you're lazy.

Pace of Relationship

Both individuals feel as though you have ownership and control over your portion of the relationship, including preferences, dislikes, and the pace of the relationship progresses.

Example: Your partner wants to share your relationship on Facebook but you let them know you're not ready yet. They respect your preference and agree to continue asking your permission before sharing information about you together.

You feel pressured into meeting the desires of the other individual, ignoring your own preferences and feelings. When you express your own desires they are ignored or belittled.

Example: Your partner posts a photo of you together online. You tell them you aren't comfortable with that and they accuse you of being embarrassed of them. They don't take it down.

You feel forced into commitment faster than you are comfortable with. They may lie and manipulate you into getting what they want, telling you that if you really cared about them you would do what they say.

Example: You go on a first date and the individual attempts to kiss you. You tell them you are not interested in kissing them. They accuse you of misleading them and demand that you give them a kiss.



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Finances

Partners have control over their own finances. They may choose at some point to combine finances, but each person is able to access their money independently and make financial decisions.

Example: You decide to get married and you open a joint checking account with your partner. Each of you checks in before you make a big purchase, but you feel comfortable making everyday purchases like groceries.

They are highly critical of the way you spend your money or earn your money. They may consistently borrow money but never repay it.

Example: You work as a tattoo artist. Whenever you talk about work, your mother asks you when you're going to get a real job.

They control your money and expect you to pay for everything or to support them. They try to keep you from having financial independence.

Example: Your roommate expects you to pay for groceries every month and buy the foods that they like. If you come home without their favorite chips, they'll throw away the groceries.

Support

You share excitement for one another, listen to each other when challenges arise and offer supportive advice when it is asked of you. When you try new things, they seem interested.

Example: You decide to try a dance class and you're nervous about it. Your friend offers to go with you so you feel more comfortable.

You are constantly criticized for your choices and decisions. Often you are reminded of your past failures or challenges. They don't seem interested in you or your interests.

Example: You let your friend know that you are thinking of going back to school. As you share this, your friend makes a disgusted face and responds by saying, "Don't you remember what happened last time? If you couldn't handle school before, there's no way you can handle it now."

You are told that you are never good enough, that you shouldn't try new things because you will always fail, and you are continuously discouraged from following your passions or desires. They belittle you publicly.

Example: You share with a coworker that you are going to apply for a promotion. They laugh at you and tell you that you'll never get the job. Upon returning to the office your coworker loudly tells your boss about your plan to apply and belittles you in front of them.



Emotions

Healthy

Time Together

You both feel happy and excited to spend time together. You may share mutual interests and enjoy participating in activities together.

Example: You both love to hike and enjoy planning trips exploring your favorite trails together.

Unhealthy

You spend much of your time together concerned about what to say or do next, it feels forced or exhausting to be together with the individual.

Example: You are doing one of your favorite activities but instead of enjoying it together, you find yourself more focused on the other person and if they are happy.

Abusive

You feel afraid or tense when you spend time with this person. They refuse to do what you want to do and make you feel bad about yourself if you push back.

Example: You suggest watching one of your favorite movies and they tell you that your choice is terrible, the movie is bad, and you should watch what they suggest instead because you have poor taste in film.

Anger

Both partners can express when they are angry, frustrated, or unhappy. Sharing your frustrations does not result in violence or fear.

Example: “It really frustrates me when you leave your dirty clothes out. Can you please toss them in the hamper after dressing?”

You do not feel safe or able to express anger with your partner, your partner makes it known that anger is “not okay” in your relationship, or your partner has an extreme temper and may move quickly to yell or give you the silent treatment.

Example: You inform your partner that their behavior has upset you. They ignore you and refuse to speak to you for the rest of the day.

The individual exhibits explosive anger, which could include yelling, offensive language or threats, physical violence or destroying property, controlling or manipulative ideas.

Example: Your partner comes home upset and begins yelling at you for how dirty the house is. They threaten to kick you out of the home if you don't clean things up immediately.

Love

Your partner shows your preferred form of affection to you regularly. Each partner is comfortable expressing their preferred expression of love and can communicate this openly and without judgement.

Note: autistic partners may be less likely to say “I love you”. Discuss this if it is something you desire in your relationship.

Example: You receive love in the form of quality time together with loved ones. You and your partner schedule time at the end of the day to relax on the couch together and watch a favorite TV show.

You feel responsible for ensuring your partner is always happy. If they feel unhappy, they blame you for their feelings.

Example: You have an important work project to complete, but when your partner comes home they are in a foul mood and demand that you make them their favorite meal to feel better.

You feel as though you constantly have to earn love from this person. They may withhold affection until you do as they wish, and when you do something for them, they flood you with affection and love.

Example: You come home from work and your partner refuses to speak to you until you make them dinner, then after dinner they tell you how its your fault that they had a bad day because you are a bad listener.



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Controlling Behavior

They can effectively express if/when your behavior is impacting them. They allow you to make decisions about your own behavior based on that information.

Example: Your coworker tells you that they have trouble concentrating on their work when you take personal calls in your shared office space. You decide to use the breakroom to answer any personal calls.

They continually criticize your choices and only offer support or affirmation when you agree to their decisions. You find yourself considering their preferences before your own.

Example: Your partner tells you that your clothes are too revealing and that you shouldn't be showing off so much of your skin. Only when you agree to change into something to their liking do they agree to join you out of the house.

You feel pressured to do the things they desire, especially sexual acts, what clothing to wear, who you can see, and where you can go. You are fearful of their response if you go against their wishes.

Example: After a night out, your partner yells at you for how revealing your outfit is. They call you horrible names and make you feel awful about your clothing choices and self-image.

Space and Privacy

They are supportive when you spend time alone or with other friends. They respect that you choose to keep certain information private and trust that you will communicate as you feel comfortable.

Example: Your roommate invites you to a game night with friends. You decline in favor of a quiet night spent in. They wish you a good night and make sure to be quiet when they return later.

They always need to know where you are and who you are with. They demand that you send them frequent updates so they know exactly what is going on at all times.

Example: You get a drink with coworkers. While you are out, your partner sends you endless text messages asking where you are, who you are with, and what you are doing. You can't enjoy yourself because they continue to send you messages.

They demand that you go everywhere together. You are not to see other people without them around. You feel trapped and do not have any privacy. They go through your phone, computer, diary, etc.

Example: You enjoy journaling. Your partner demands to see your journal and read what you have written. When you refuse, they accuse you of being a liar and a cheater, and they berate you with abusive language.



Independence and Control

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Jealousy

You both may experience jealousy at times, but do not allow this brief feeling to escalate and continue to trust one another in your choices.

Example: You were recently promoted at your job and you share this news with your coworker. They may feel some frustration at being passed over for the promotion, but are still happy and supportive of you.

They seem resentful of how you choose to live your life. They frequently express hateful responses to your decisions and their jealousy can quickly turn to anger toward you.

Example: You get a promotion and each time you see a particular coworker they tell you that you aren't qualified for the promotion, that you didn't deserve it, and that they should have been promoted instead.

They continually show resentment towards you and their jealous feelings move beyond words into aggressive or harmful actions and violence. They try to defend their actions by stating their jealousy is a sign of how much they love you.

Example: You're going to see an old friend. As you are leaving, your partner says that they are coming with you. You say you'd like to go alone, to which your partner responds by locking the door and yelling that you can't go anywhere without them.

Boundaries

You both feel comfortable setting boundaries. You're both happy to express and discuss them to ensure you both feel safe and supported.

Example: You greet a friend by asking for a hug. They express that they aren't comfortable with that. In respecting their boundary, you wave hello and let them know it's great to see them once again.

They assume that you know and will adhere to their boundaries without ever explicitly sharing them. They continually question your boundaries and choose to ignore or discount your preferences.

Example: You meet a friend and they go in for a hug to greet you. You let them know that you are uncomfortable with that. They say you are being too sensitive and proceed to try and give you a hug anyways.

They ignore your boundaries and belittle you when you try and reaffirm your boundaries. If you violate any of their boundaries they quickly escalate to anger.

Example: You meet a friend. They go in for a hug to greet you. You let them know that you are uncomfortable with that kind of touch. They yell at you and accuse you of hating them.



Communication

Healthy

Unhealthy

Abusive

Problem Solving

You each feel comfortable in communicating when a problem arises. You work through challenges together as a team. Instead of a “me vs. you” dynamic, you have a “we” approach.

Example: Your roommate leaves their used dishes on the kitchen counter and they start to smell. You ask your roommate if they’d please put their dishes in the dishwasher when they’re done eating and they say “sure, thanks for the reminder.”

When issues arise, they don’t acknowledge your feelings and rather than take responsibility for the way they made you feel, they try to make it up to you through gifts or favors. They won’t apologize and may try to ignore that an issue ever arose.

Example: Your friend is supposed to pick you up but they’re over an hour late. You tell them you are frustrated and angry. Your friend tells you to lighten up and promises to buy you dinner instead of owning their actions.

You are pressured into taking responsibility for their unhealthy, offensive and insulting actions, while they never take ownership of their choices. If an issue arises, you are expected to solve it or smooth things over. When they don’t receive their desired outcome, they may lash out.

Example: You ask your roommate to clean up their dirty dishes. They refuse to acknowledge you and storm out of your apartment, leaving you to clean up after them.

Honesty

They are honest and openly share their feelings. At times they may tell a small white lie, but will be honest about important topics.

Example: Your partner is hosting a surprise party for you, and they tell you that you should come over and hang out. It’s actually the party! This is a white lie to make the surprise. However when you feel anxious and ask them to tell you what to expect, they always do.

They lie about important topics or hide things that you want to know. Often they will lie repeatedly about something.

Example: Your brother tells you he stopped smoking, but you catch him smoking outside your house.

They lie often about many things. Sometimes it’s hard for you to guess if they’re lying or telling the truth because they lie so often. They may tell the truth but with the intent of being cruel.

Example: Your partner tells you that you’re ugly and when you protest they say they’re just being honest. They lie about being sexual with another partner.



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Secrets

You both communicate what info should remain private, and feel comfortable setting that boundary or requesting information.

Example: You tell your co-worker that you are up for a promotion but ask that they keep it private until you are ready to announce it publicly. They congratulate you and agree not to share the news yet.

They hide where they've been or who they're with, and ignore any questions or concerns you might have. They imply that you're controlling when you ask.

Example: Your partner stays out all night, and when you hear them come in in the morning you ask where they were. They won't tell you and accuse you of being jealous.

They hide things from you, but hold you to a different standard (you can't have any secrets). You don't know basic or important information about them. They may ask you to keep secrets or lie to your friends and family.

Example: You and your partner are visiting your parents. Beforehand, your partner tells you that you can't tell your parents that you lost your job. They want you to look good in front of your family.

Personal Information

Each individual has control over what information they share. This may include personal details like gender identity, religious beliefs, or special interest areas, among others. You both feel comfortable sharing information at your discretion, respecting the extent and pace at which you share.

Example: You're hanging out with friends and they introduce you to someone new. They share their pronouns, you welcome them and work to use the correct pronouns.

You feel as though you must be transparent with all of your information. If you choose to keep certain information private, you are accused of being dishonest and hiding things.

Example: You receive a text message while relaxing at home with your partner. They immediately ask you who the text is from and when you inform them that it is private they accuse you of cheating on them.

You feel like you are under constant surveillance and every decision you make is heavily criticized, making you less and less likely to share your ideas or preferences. While you are expected to share everything, you aren't allowed access to any of their information.

Example: You ask your partner where they were last night, and they respond by yelling at you and accusing you of cheating. They tell you that you need to stay home for the next week to show that you're being honest.