

Safe Relationships



By queer youth, for queer youth



Introduction

Relationships are difficult for everyone, and can be especially vulnerable for queer youth.

To combat this issue, Queer Youth Assemble has created this guide to safe and healthy relationships. It includes sections on communication skills, green flags, red flags, setting boundaries, leaving unsafe relationships, scripts for asking for consent, bringing up past trauma in a relationship, how trauma can affect relationships, and resources for if something happens.

Throughout this guide, relationship will be used to refer to a relationship that is committed and has characteristics of stereotypical dating, though it is applicable to romantic, queerplatonic, and platonic relationships.

This guide will cover triggering content such as: emotional abuse, grooming, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, sexual assault, and suicide mention.



Communication Skills

Effective Communication Script:

- Describe the situation objectively. This means using facts to avoid opinion and interpretation. The goal is to ensure all parties are on the same page.
- Let others know how a situation affects you through clear language rather than waiting for them to infer. "I feel (x) because (x)."
- Say what you mean- for example, don't say: "Oh, well, I don't know if I can or cannot cook tonight." Try saying: "I won't be able to, due to working late."
- Consider how the other person may or may not interpret body language, including posture, proximity, eye contact, and more.
- Acknowledge good responses. This could look like a simple smile or "thank you".
- Understand that every situation can't yield your ideal response; be open to negotiation, without breaking yours or others' boundaries.



Communication Skills

Listening Skills:

- Practice reciprocal and active listening, holding space for you and others' to advocate and share.
- Try to validate people's needs, feelings, and wants.
- If you hear someone you disagree with, articulate that disagreement as respectfully and concisely as you think is appropriate.
- Avoid telling people what they are experiencing.
- If there seems to be a misunderstanding, clarify without making assumptions or projecting.

Listening Skills Script:

- "I hear you saying (x), is that correct?"
- "It seems like you're feeling (x), is there any way I can help you deal with this or alter my behavior to avoid this situation in the future?"
- "I heard you're struggling with (x), but this is also an important boundary for me. Can we try and find a compromise that meets both our needs?"



Green Flags

"Green Flags" are positive traits or behaviors people can show.

- Able to discuss feelings and self-advocate
- Can both set and respect others' boundaries
- Able to be emotionally self-reliant
- Reveals vulnerable information gradually and appropriately
- Doesn't put you into compromising, vulnerable, or unsafe situations
- Has other healthy, communicative, and sustained relationships
- Can balance need for control with flexibility
- Able to express fears and vulnerabilities
- Reliable, or communicative about fluctuating reliability
- Listens and affirms others' feelings and needs
- Can take gentle constructive feedback, accept responsibility, and apologize
- Is willing to work through conflicts



Red Flags

TW: emotional abuse, grooming. Red flags are traits that may indicate that you are in an unsafe relationship, or participating in unhealthy behaviors.

Emotional abuse:

- **Humiliation, negating, criticizing**
 - name-calling, character assassination, yelling, dismissiveness, patronizing, embarrassment, belittling, putting down, insulting, intentional aggravation
- **Control and shame**
 - threatening, monitoring location and activities, digital monitoring, gaslighting (what is gaslighting?), making decisions on your behalf, manipulation, shaming you for mistakes, being aggressively demanding, having outbursts to control you, being unpredictable to the point of harm, walking out on you, shutting down during disagreement to disallow you from self-advocating.



Red Flags

- **Accusation, blame, denial**
 - jealousy, guiltting you (by comparison to themselves, “look how much I do”, “you caused this, you must fix it in x way”), setting unrealistic expectations, blaming you to a point of excess, denying or refusing to listen when you call out hurtful behavior, trivializing your feelings and pain, blaming you for their problems.
- **Emotional neglect and isolation**
 - dehumanizing you, keeping you away from friends/family/social situations, invalidating your needs/boundaries/feelings/pain, trying to come between you and your other relationships, silent treatment, withholding affection, shutting down communication, attempting to persuade others to do the aforementioned with them, denying you physical or emotional support, persistent interrupting.



Red Flags

Grooming warning signs:

- Grooming can occur online or in person, and typically comes from someone already close to the victim, such as a family member, coach, or teacher
- Pattern of grooming: selection of victim, isolation of victim so that they become close to the groomer, development of trust through attention/gifts/secrets, desensitization to touch/sexual topics (hugging, wrestling, showing explicit content), attempts to make abuse seem acceptable
- Warning signs for teens: relationship between an adult and teen involving undue secrecy, influence, control, or boundary crossing
- Groomers frequently attempt to also manipulate a broader community to seem trustworthy, making it difficult for community members to notice the abuse and for the victim to recognize that this behavior can come from someone in a high social position



Red Flags

- Avoid stranger danger mentality, and instead focus on understanding risks of certain situations and building trust with your community so you can feel comfortable talking about anything that may happen that feels unsafe
- Coercion tactics, frequently used when groomed online
 - “I’ll show you if you show me”
 - Offering something in exchange for sexually explicit content
 - Pretending to work for a modeling agency
 - Developing friendship or relationship dynamic in order to gain trust and exploit an individual
 - Secretly recording photo/video
 - Physical threats to individual or their family
 - Threats to commit suicide or other harm to self
 - Threats to post explicit content or conversations



Setting Boundaries

- If possible, try having conversations about physical intimacy beforehand.
- Communicate what you are and are not comfortable or able to do in terms of physicality, and listen to what your partner feels on the matter.
- If you experience fluctuating comfort with physical intimacy, consider having "safe words" that indicate what you are open to at a given moment. For example, "green light" could mean any touch is fine, "yellow light" that cuddling is fine, and "red light" that touch is off-limits.
- Always honor your partners physical boundaries alongside your own.
- You do not need to rationalize or explain any boundaries, physical or otherwise, you might have.
- Never assume consent; ask or establish a system which makes consent abundantly clear.



Setting Boundaries

- Remember you can change your mind and boundaries as things progress, and can communicate accordingly.
- If your partner disregards your boundary, or uses manipulative tactics to pressure you, that is a red flag that they are acting unsafely and without consideration for you wants, needs, and comfort.
- You do not owe your partner satisfaction at the expense of your comfort.

Boundary Setting Scripts:

- "I feel (x) because (x) so I need (x)."
- "Not respecting this will result in (x)."
- "(x) makes me uncomfortable."
- "(x) is not something I am able or willing to do right now"



Leaving an Unsafe Relationship

- **Don't go into it alone:** inform friends/family of what is going on, break up in public place to avoid risk of violence, have someone accompany you for the conversation or be close by for support
- **Be direct and respectful:** practice standing your ground and saying what you need to, prepare for attempts to manipulate or gaslight you and how best you can respond (ie calling out the manipulation, reiterating your point, removing yourself from the situation, having someone assist you)
- **Access professional mental healthcare:** if available, therapy can be a helpful space to work through emotions or cognitive patterns that have resulted from being in an unsafe or abusive relationship
- **Refuse contact:** allocate a time period after breakup in which you will not respond to messages/calls or meet with them in order to avoid being gaslit, manipulated to reform the relationship, or otherwise harmed



Consent Scripts

"Do you mind if I talk about (x)?"

"Can I vent about (x)?"

"I understand if you can't handle this subject, or aren't available to talk about it right now. Your feelings matter too, and you can stop me at any time if it gets too heavy."

"Can I do (x)?"

"I want to make sure you're comfortable with this, should I/we keep going?"

"It is totally okay if you aren't comfortable with this- we can do something else if that would feel more comfortable. What do you think?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Do you want to (x)?"

Remember, **asking these questions preemptively, or before you're actively engaged in a situation of any sort can build trust and comfort!**



How to Talk About Relational Trauma

It is hard to set an approximate timeframe for when disclosing traumatic history is appropriate. Here are some general suggestions.

- Establish trust with a person.
- Ensure that they are comfortable with the nature and intensity of what you plan to disclose. Consent, here too, is critical.
- Share as much or as little as is comfortable- you aren't obligated to tell partners everything.
- Know that in all likelihood, they are not trained professionals, so set expectations for responses accordingly. It is absolutely okay to tell them what you hope to hear in response.
- Think: "what do I want out of sharing this trauma?"
- Find a safe and private space and time to share.



How Trauma Can Impact Relationships

- In order to have a healthy relationship after abuse, ensure that you are in a good space emotionally and will be able to follow your partner's boundaries and uphold your own.
- It can make the trauma-affected person have issues with trust and/or intimacy. For example, it can make them afraid of vulnerability, which can impact how open they seem in a relationship.
- Trauma can affect basically all aspects of a person's life, and a relationship is not exempt from that.
- It can easily lead to certain topics being hard for the person to handle. For example, if a person has trauma about (x), then talking about that specific topic might be hard for them.



How Trauma Can Impact Relationships

- It can cause a person's attachment styles to change or become unusual in comparison to other people.
- Having trauma does not mean that you will never be in a healthy, happy relationship! **Survivors can be in healthy, happy relationships just as much as anyone else can.**
- The trauma-affected person may need more emotional support or other forms of care compared to other people.



Resources

National Domestic Violence Hotline (SAFE): **1-800-799-7233** (SAFE) or **1-800-787-3224** (TTY)

National Sexual Assault Hotline (RAINN): **1-800-656-4673**
Text line

Finding a therapist after sexual assault (Psychology Today)

Finding a therapist after domestic violence (Psychology Today)

Sources

Trauma in relationships

Trauma and intimacy

Past trauma

Disclosing trauma

Setting boundaries

Physical boundaries

Consent

Consent

Communication skill

Green Flags

Identifying emotional abuse

Grooming

Online grooming

Leaving unsafe relationships



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