Relationships Problems

Relationships - whether family or intimate relationships with a partner - can be a great source of love, pleasure, support and excitement. However they can also be a source of grief and anguish if they go wrong. The issue is made more relevant for students by the fact that most people in a university are in a period of personal change, which can make them feel less sure of what they want or how they can expect others to react.

Research into what makes relationships work successfully - whether family relationships, friendships or partnerships - tend to come up with the same few things:

- **Acceptance of difference**
  
  People in successful relationships do not try to force the others to be exactly like them; they work to accept difference even when this difference is profound.

- **Capacity for boundaries**
  
  People are aware that there is a point where they stop and the other person begins. Sadly, it is unrealistic to expect others to solve all our problems or meet all our needs - even though we may hope for this at times.

- **Operating mainly in the present**
  
  Once relationships either focus on repeatedly picking over past events, or else are based only on the hope that things will be better tomorrow, they tend to go off the rails.

- **Respect for individual choice**
  
  It is accepted that each person has the right to decide their own direction in life: the relationship then adapts to follow this.

- **Skill in negotiating**
  
  Once each individual has decided what they want, the couple or family are able to work out a way to fulfil these different goals without anyone having to compromise totally.

- **Sharing positive feelings**
  
  In a couple this may be sexual intimacy; however it can also just be pleasantness and kindness, as it is in a family.

The headings come from research carried out by Beaver.

Thus it might seem that a relationship requires quite a lot of individual skill and self-sufficiency which can be a bit off-putting at first. However it is comforting to consider the research of John Bowlby on attachment. He concluded that human beings are innately social and tend instinctively to know how to form close attachments to others.

Relationship problems often arise not because we never learned what to do, but because we have lost touch with this instinctive good sense and become over-anxious about our relationships.
This may be because we have lost our own self-respect and sense of our personal worth; it may be because we are in personal distress and so putting too much pressure on our relationships; it may be because we have had unfortunate experiences in past relationships and so have temporarily lost our ability to trust.

We may have been out of touch with our ability to make successful relationships for so long that we may doubt if we ever had it. However most people seem able to recover these skills if they put their mind to it.

Much work on improving a relationship can start with the individual. If one person is clear and reasoned about what they want and more consistent about how they ask for it, the whole relationship can begin to be put on a different basis.

Dealing with Problems in your Family

Family problems can be difficult to get a handle on as there might be a lot of people involved. Also most of us are not used to looking at our families objectively - we tend to think they are just our family and that is how it is. However a bit of reflection and analysis can take the heat out of a lot of difficult situations.

Try and think objectively about what you are trying to achieve. Give yourself the benefit of any doubt and attribute the best motives to your behaviour. Get together all the examples you can of where the plan has worked for others etc. Maybe get a friend to help you. You don't have to write it down, just think it through. If at this point you realise you're doing the wrong thing, you might want to make a strategic withdrawal! However let's assume you end up convinced you know what you are doing and you have a bit of evidence to back this up.

Think about why your family is disagreeing with you. There is probably more than one reason. Maybe they don't understand your plan; maybe they had a course of action decided for you; maybe they have some worries and anxieties of their own. Make a real effort to think yourself into their shoes even though their behaviour may be very frustrating to you. Imagine discussing the question with them - think of what you might say and how they might reply. When you've thought of what might be worrying them, think creatively of ways of reassuring them. If it helps, make a list of their worries and reassurances.

Find some way of discussing it. That's easy if your family are talkers, but many families aren't. However you can still find an opportunity to calmly mention your plans, to give a few examples of others who have done the same, to reassure their fears and sympathise with their disappointment. You may have to drop your points into the conversation over a time. Don't expect a miracle - people rarely change their opinion overnight. Don't feel you have to have total agreement; stop the discussion while the going is still good and come back to it a few days later. If they see you're serious and that some of their worries have been considered they will probably be a bit more agreeable the next time.

This is obviously a very simple example, but a similar approach can help in many situations. Frequently the conflict can be the other way round; many families find a son or daughter leaving for university is the catalyst for them to make changes. Sometimes it can be impossible to find agreement. If you are interested in discussing the situation further or if find you can't use the techniques described in this simple example - maybe the problem is too complex; you find it too upsetting; someone is too entrenched - counselling with the Student Counselling Service may help you to clarify what is going on and to find a way to deal with it.
**Suggested Reading**

Robin Skinner and John Cleese - Families and How to Survive Them – Methuen - a light-hearted book which nonetheless explores many of the dynamics of family life well.

**Dealing with Problems in Your Personal Relationships**

Large books and lengthy courses have been created to explore the infinite complexity of human relationships. Problems can arise from a large number of sources and it can frequently need some care to help disentangle the mixture of influences. These problems can be intensified by the pressures from others to form or end a relationship and the general pressures from the media which give an idealised view of couples which is often at odds with the reality many people experience.

Here are some simple guidelines to help you explore and resolve tensions which you may be feeling about relationships.

Do you know what you are looking for in a relationship? There are many different reasons for entering into a relationship - for companionship; for sexual experience; to have a long-term partner; to create a family and so on. Do you know what you are looking for? Have you discussed this with your partner? If not there is a distinct possibility that you may both end up seriously at cross-purposes.

Are you asking too much or expecting too little from your relationship? A good relationship can provide support, sexual expression, companionship and eventually an opportunity to build a joint life. If you are looking to it to provide more than this - for example to give you a sense of purpose and worth or protect you from some deep personal fear - you may be trying to get a partner to provide things that in fact only you can achieve. If on the other hand a relationship brings you continual grief and unhappiness you may be accepting for yourself a far lower level of interaction than you have a right to expect. In particular no-one deserves to be on the receiving end of physical or sexual violence. Do look for the support you need to change or end a relationship if abuse is happening to you.

Have you got a model for the relationship you are trying to build? Many people find it helpful to picture a relationship that they admire and to which they wish to aspire. It may be the relationship of someone you know or a fictional one. Consider how the people in this relationship resolve differences and difficulties. If it is not obvious and the relationship is a real one, ask them. If they have never been seen to have any problems, maybe they are not a terribly realistic model after all! Finding such a model can be a particularly difficult and important task for gay and lesbian couples.

Can you talk about problems? In all relationships there are going to be times of serious disagreement, where a conflict of interests has to be resolved. This doesn't mean there is something wrong with the relationship. However, arguing the point out and reaching agreement does take a bit of skill and practice. Many relationship counsellors suggest the best way to resolve a relationship problem is to speak for up to fifteen minutes about your view of the problem. The other person listens carefully, interrupting only to clarify and to help you express yourself clearly. Then you swap over and the other person takes a similar time to explain their point of view. Finally take half-an-hour to talk together to see if you can resolve the difference. If you don't succeed this time, return to the problem a few days later and try again.

If you are not in the habit of talking in your relationship, it might be interesting to give it a try. Relationships are one of the curious features of human existence and can be well worth exploring.
Golden rules for arguing constructively:

**Do**-
- Know why you are arguing before you start
- Devote some time to resolving the problem
- Sit down and make eye contact
- Speak personally about what you feel
- Acknowledge when the other person makes a valid point
- Agree to differ if you cannot agree
- Stick to the matter in hand
- Cease arguing and separate if there is any likelihood of violence

**Try not to**-
- Behave aggressively or disrespectfully
- Argue deliberately to hurt the other person's feelings
- Generalise
- Bring up old unresolved disputes
- Walk away without deciding when discussion will be resumed (unless violence threatens)
- Bring other peoples' opinions in
- Argue about something for more than an hour
- Argue late at night or after drinking

There are a great range of relationships and of relationship difficulties. Counselling can be a great help in allowing to clarify complex relationship problems.

**Suggested Reading and Further Help**

Relate Guide to Relationships - Sarah Litvinoff – Vermillion - A comprehensive and easy to read guide to all aspects of couple relationships. Includes many case histories and a lot of self-help exercises.

The Student Counselling Service will offer counselling on relationship problems. Non-students and students requiring specialist help or help outside the College environment may prefer to contact Relate. To find out more you can contact Relate's booking line on 0300 100 1234 or visit their website [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk).

**References**
