



GIG
CYMRU
NHS
WALES

Iechyd Cyhoeddus
Cymru
Public Health
Wales

What are the challenges of building and maintaining good relationships?



Maintaining Relationships

Relationships are central to a person's well-being and development, spanning family, friendship, peer and school contexts. Positive relationships provide trust, belonging and emotional support - but they also require consistent effort to sustain.

Misunderstandings, disagreements and changes in circumstances are inevitable and can challenge even strong connections.

Reflective questions include:

- *How do arguments affect emotional well-being?*
- *What qualities make some friendships more resilient than others?*
- *Why do relationships evolve across the life course?*

Addressing these issues helps young people understand that challenges are a normal part of maintaining healthy social bonds.



Healthy Boundaries: Why They Matter in Relationships

What Are Healthy Boundaries?

Boundaries are the personal limits that protect well-being, respect and emotional safety. They define what is acceptable and help prevent discomfort or harm.

Why They Matter:

- Encourage safety and respect
- Promote clear communication
- Prevent dependency or feelings of being overwhelmed

Examples:

- Politely declining contact outside agreed times to protect rest and routine
- Making clear that private items, such as journals or devices, are personal

How to Set Boundaries:

- Use clear, confident communication (e.g., "I feel uncomfortable when...")
- Remain polite but consistent

How to Respect Boundaries:

- Listen when others express limits
- Avoid pressuring someone to change their boundaries
- Offer genuine apologies if boundaries are crossed

Communication Barriers in Relationships

Communication barriers hinder understanding and often lead to confusion, conflict and frustration.

Barrier	Explanation	Example
Not Listening Properly	Getting distracted and not paying full attention.	Thinking about what someone will say next instead of listening.
Misunderstanding Tone or Meaning	Misinterpreting words, especially in texts or messages.	Reading a message as rude when it wasn't meant that way.
Fear of Speaking Up	Feeling nervous or afraid to share feelings.	Not telling a friend they are upset to avoid causing drama.
Assumptions	Jumping to conclusions without asking for clarification.	Assuming someone is angry with them when the person is just having a bad day.
Different Communication Styles	Some people are direct, while others are more indirect.	One friend prefers talking things out, while another prefers to have some space.

Overcoming Communication Barriers in Relationships

Communication includes a wide range of skills and preferences and can look very different across neurotypes.

Active Listening

- Give full attention to the speaker. This may include reducing sensory distractions or no eye contact required
- Reflect back or summarise what has been heard to confirm understanding, especially when communication styles differ
- Allow processing time and ask clear, direct clarifying questions rather than assuming understanding

Speaking Clearly and Respectfully

- Use “I” statements to express your feelings without blame(e.g., “I feel upset when...”)
- Share emotions calmly in a way that feels manageable instead of shouting or withdrawing
- Pause before speaking to choose words carefully, as even brief comments can have a lasting impact

Understanding Different Communication Styles

- Some share emotions easily, others may need more time, structure, or prompts to express feelings
- Some prefer face-to-face conversation, others may communicate more clearly through text, email or written reflection
- Non-verbal cues (facial expressions, body language) can be meaningful for some, but less noticeable or harder to interpret for others

Seeking Clarification

- Ask directly for clarification to reduce misunderstandings: “Did you mean...?” or “Could you explain that another way?”
- Confirm meanings, especially with digital messages where tone can be unclear
- Avoid assumptions by checking understanding first, rather than jumping to conclusions

Dealing with Conflict: Effective Strategies for Resolution

Conflict is natural when needs or opinions differ. What matters is how it is managed.

Common Causes of Conflict

Cause of Conflict	Explanation	Example
Misunderstandings	Not fully understanding what someone means.	Thinking a friend ignored them when they just didn't hear them.
Different Needs or Wants	Wanting different things at the same time	Two people wanting to play different games.
Unclear Communication	Speaking in a way that confuses or upsets someone.	Saying "whatever" in an argument, making the other person feel dismissed.
Assumptions	Jumping to conclusions without asking questions.	Assuming someone is mad with them when actually that person may have had a lot on their mind.
Feeling Left Out	Being excluded from a group or activity.	A group of friends making plans without inviting everyone.

Steps to Resolve Conflict

Step 1: Stay Calm

- Pause and take a breath before responding
- Avoid yelling, name-calling or reacting impulsively

Example: Instead of shouting if a classmate takes a pencil, calmly ask, "Hey, did you borrow that from me?"

Step 2: Listen Actively

- Allow the other person to explain their perspective
- Show understanding by paraphrasing what they said
- Ask clarifying questions if needed

Example: "So you thought I didn't want to play with you? That's not true - I just needed to finish my homework."

Step 3: Use "I" Statements

- Express feelings without blaming

Examples:

❌ "You never listen to me!" → ✅ "I feel ignored when I don't get a chance to speak."

❌ "You're being mean!" → ✅ "I feel hurt when you say that."

Step 4: Find a Solution Together

- Look for compromise or a middle ground
- Brainstorm ways to satisfy both sides
- If needed, agree to pause and revisit later
Example: If friends want to play different games, they could agree to take turns.

Step 5: Move On

- Once resolved, let go of the argument
- Practice forgiveness instead of holding grudges
- Apply lessons learned if conflict arises again
Example: After reconciling, friends should avoid bringing up past mistakes.

Managing Expectations and Avoiding Relationship Burnout

Healthy relationships require balance and realistic expectations. Over-demanding constant attention, agreement or conformity can quickly erode trust and create tension.

Why Are Expectations Important?

Healthy relationships thrive on fairness and realistic expectations. Demanding constant attention or agreement often leads to frustration.

To Communicate Effectively, People should:

- ✓ Be clear about their feelings
- ✓ Respect different opinions
- ✓ Set boundaries
- ✓ Be open to change

Avoiding Relationship Burnout:

- Prioritise fairness, space and reciprocity
- Maintain clear boundaries and open dialogue
- Recognise that time apart and individual pursuits strengthen, rather than weaken, relationships

Healthy relationships are sustainable when nurtured with balance, respect and realistic demands.

Handling Long-Distance Relationships and Separation

Separation - whether due to moving schools, relocation or life transitions - requires adaptability and resilience.

Key Approaches:

- **Regular communication:** Through video calls, shared routines or messages to maintain closeness
- **Realistic expectations:** Avoid over-commitment or assumptions about constant contact
- **Adaptability:** Accept that relationships may shift over time and allow for personal growth

Practical Tips:

- **Stay connected:** setting up regular check-ins or shared routines.
- **Balance commitments:** across school, social and personal responsibilities
- **Practice emotional coping** strategies like journaling or talking to trusted people.

By fostering open communication, setting realistic expectations and supporting each other's growth, people can maintain strong and meaningful relationships, even during periods of separation.

The Impact of low well-being on Relationship Health

Experiencing low mental well-being and stress can significantly affect relationship quality. These conditions may reduce a person's ability to respond to others and the world around them. Relationships that are safe, stable and nurturing can support the body's stress response system and help us to manage feelings of distress.

Key Takeaways:

- **Open communication is essential:** Encouraging safe spaces where individuals can discuss their well-being and feelings of distress helps reduce misunderstandings.
- **Empathy and support:** Practicing understanding and offering emotional support strengthens relationships.
- **Self-compassion:** Practicing self-compassion and setting healthy boundaries are vital for maintaining a healthy balance in relationships.

Tips for Healthy Relationships:

- **Talk openly** about mental health and well-being with loved ones.
- **Practice patience** and understanding during tough times.
- **Seek support** as early as possible from mental health professionals when needed.

Recap

Building and maintaining relationships brings both rewards and challenges. These challenges are not obstacles to avoid but opportunities for growth.

By addressing communication barriers, managing expectations, navigating conflict and supporting one another through change or difficulty, people can:

- Develop resilience
- Deepen mutual understanding
- Build long-lasting, supportive connections

Ultimately, while relationships can be complex, the effort invested enriches well-being, strengthens communities and fosters meaningful bonds.

References

The information provided in this slide set took references from the following:

- [Ways to better wellbeing - Hapus](#)
- [Top tips on building and maintaining healthy relationships | Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [Maintaining healthy relationships and mental wellbeing - NHS](#)
- [Relationships and community: statistics | Mental Health Foundation](#)
- <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/about-autism/autism-and-communication>
- [Restorative Practice.pdf](#)

Possible learning and activity suggestions

Boundary Scenarios Sorting

Objective: Identify healthy vs. unhealthy boundaries.

- **Activity:** Provide learners with scenario cards (e.g., “A friend reads your messages without asking,” “You tell someone you need space after an argument”). Learners sort them into:
- **Healthy Boundary**
- **Unhealthy Boundary**
- **Needs Discussion**
- **Debrief:** What makes a boundary healthy? Can boundaries change over time?

Role Play: Miscommunication Moments

Objective: Explore how misunderstandings happen.

- **Activity 1:** Learners act out short scenarios where communication breaks down (e.g., texting tone misunderstood, someone interrupts, assumptions made). Then, they re-do the scene using better communication strategies.
- **Activity 2:** Show learners short text messages (e.g., “Fine.” “Whatever.” “Sure!”) and ask them to interpret the tone. Then, discuss how tone can be misunderstood in digital communication.
- **Debrief:** What changed the outcome? What helped improve understanding?

Conflict Resolution Toolbox

- **Objective:** Build a toolkit of strategies.
- **Activity:** Learners create a “toolbox” of conflict resolution strategies using drawings or written notes. Tools might include:
- **Active listening**
- **Asking for clarification**
- **Taking a break**
- **Using “I” statements**
- Decorate and display toolboxes in the classroom.

Expectation vs. Reality Discussion

Objective: Explore realistic relationship expectations.

- **Activity:** In small groups, learners discuss:
- **“How often should friends stay in touch?”**
- **“Is it okay if a friendship changes over time?”**
- **“What helps avoid disappointment?”**
- **Outcome:** Create a class list of healthy expectations for long-distance relationships.

Self-Esteem Reflection Journal

Objective: Encourage personal insight and emotional awareness.

- **Activity:** Learners write a journal entry responding to prompts like:
- **“What makes me feel confident?”**
- **“How do I support my friends?”**
- **“What’s one thing I’ve learned about myself this year?”**
- Share reflections in pairs or small groups (optional).