Dear Alice,

What are some ways to identify and deal with unhealthy relationships? And what strategies can people use to enhance relationships? What are some internal and external support resources that are available for people dealing with unhealthy relationships?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Throughout our lives, we are involved in many different kinds of relationships. We have friendships, romances, work and school-related connections, familial ties, and, quite often, relations that defy categorization. Each of these situations has the potential to enrich us, adding to our feelings of self-worth, enjoyment, and growth. These relationships are healthy.

On the other hand, in other situations, we may find ourselves feeling uncomfortable. It can be difficult to come to the realization that a lover, friend, colleague, or family member is not treating us with the respect we deserve. Keep in mind that in all kinds of kinships, there is likely to be some disagreement, need for compromise, and times of frustration. These alone do not necessarily indicate that a relationship is unhealthy. Here are some things to think about when considering whether a particular bond is a healthy one or not:

**In a healthy relationship, you:**

- Treat each other with respect
- Feel secure and comfortable
- Aren’t violent with each other
- Can resolve conflicts satisfactorily
- Enjoy the time you spend together
- Support one another
- Take interest in one another’s lives: health, family, work, etc.
- Have privacy in the relationship
- Can trust each other
- Are each sexual by choice
- Communicate clearly and openly
- Have letters, phone calls, and e-mail that are your own
- Make healthy decisions about alcohol or other drugs
- Encourage other friendships
- Are honest about your past and present sexual activity if the relationship is intimate
- Know that most people in your life are happy about the relationship
- Have more good times in the relationship than bad

**In an unhealthy relationship, one or both of you:**

- Try to control or manipulate the other
- Make the other feel bad about her/himself
- Ridicule or call names
- Dictate how the other dresses
- Do not make time for each other
- Criticize the other's friends
- Are afraid of the other's temper
- Discourage the other from being close with anyone else
- Ignore each other when one is speaking
- Are overly possessive or get jealous about ordinary behavior
- Criticize or support others in criticizing people with your gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or other personal attribute
- Control the other's money or other resources (e.g., car)
- Harm or threaten to harm children, family, pets, or objects of personal value
- Push, grab, hit, punch, or throw objects
- Use physical force or threats to prevent the other from leaving

Sometimes it's not so easy to decide if a troublesome tie is supposed to be maintained the way it is, worked on, or ended before it goes any further. One thing to consider is if the relationship was ever different than it is now. Is there something stressful happening that could be impacting the way you interact? Maybe money is tight, you've moved, are looking for work, are dealing with a difficult family circumstance, or are going through some other kind of transition. Or maybe there are problems from a while back that were never resolved, and are now resurfacing. What in particular is bothering you, and what would you like to see change? Talk over these questions with each other, or with someone you trust, like a friend, teacher, or counselor. Think about what, if anything, you can each do to make the other feel more comfortable in the relationship.

If a partner, friend, or colleague is harming you or your loved ones physically, emotionally, or sexually, it's time to seek help. If s/he is encouraging other harmful behaviors, like abuse of alcohol or other drugs, unsafe sexual activity, or other activities that make you feel uncomfortable, you have a right to leave. There are a lot of resources available to help you.

If you or someone you know needs help with an unhealthy relationship, the following organizations can provide information and support:

- **24-hour National Domestic Violence Hotlines** [2] (7 days a week)
  - National Bilingual Hotline: (800) 799-SAFE (-7233)
  - (will translate into over 130 languages)
  - TTY: (800) 787-3224
- **American Psychological Association (APA)** [3]
  - (offers a practice directory for referrals to psychological services)
  - (800) 374-2723
  - TTY: (800) 336-6123
- **YMCA of the U.S.A.** [4]
Perhaps the main thing to do is to trust your instincts and the people close to you whose opinions you trust and value. Each and every one of us deserves to feel safe, valued, and cared for. Keep in mind that one of the strongest signs of a healthy relationship is that both people involved feel good about themselves. Also, by treating yourself with self-respect and believing in your right to be treated well, you are taking critical steps towards developing equitable, mutually fulfilling ties in the future.

Alice!

Related questions

- Best friend in an abusive relationship with his wife
- Too much time with boyfriend!
- Lost all control in the bedroom

Resources

- Sexual Violence Response & Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
- Mental Health Service (CUMC)

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