

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Relationship Repair: Recognizing and Managing an Unhealthy Relationship

Nothing can match the optimism, excitement and “swept off your feet” rush you feel at the beginning of a new romantic relationship. With mutual respect, open and honest communication and positive shared experiences, these feelings can continue into a life-long, rewarding partnership. Sometimes, though, excitement, hopes and ideals about the other person can cloud your judgement and get in the way of recognizing and addressing what may be an unhealthy relationship.

While all couples have arguments or disagreements from time-to-time, those in healthy relationships will find ways to compromise and work through issues together. In an unhealthy relationship, though, one or both people will try to take control over the other. You might argue a lot or feel uncomfortable, upset, scared or angry with your partner during these intense times. You may also find yourself doing or saying hurtful things, or cutting yourself off from relationships or activities just to avoid upsetting your partner.

Spotting Signs of Trouble

When a relationship starts to take a negative turn, it’s critical that you take action to repair or end it as quickly as possible. Ongoing arguments or a controlling partner can cause long-term damage to your self-esteem and sense of self. And left unresolved, an unhealthy relationship can get worse and may even lead to serious emotional or even physical abuse.

Watch for these signs of a troubled relationship, either in your partner or yourself:

Poor communication. In an unhealthy relationship, you might feel uncomfortable or afraid to express your true thoughts and feelings to your partner. Frequent insults, belittling statements or one person ignoring the other can also be warning signs that the relationship is in trouble.

Jealousy and mistrust. A healthy relationship encourages both people to spend time with friends. If you and your partner often argue about time spent with others, it may be a sign of trust issues. This is especially true if either one of you has invaded the other’s privacy by eavesdropping, checking phone records or reading e-mail messages without permission.

Fear. If you often feel fearful or anxious around your partner, or breathe a sigh of relief when he or she leaves the room, there is a good chance that your relationship is in a damaged state and in need of repair.

Anger issues. While it’s normal for couples to get angry with one another from time-to-time, frequent or explosive rage is a red flag in a relationship. This is especially true if you find yourself "walking on eggshells," changing your behavior or censoring what you say to avoid angering your partner.

Unresolved issues. If you and your partner argue about the same things over and over again, or continue to rehash past hurts, there may be some underlying issues in the relationship which need to be dealt with.

Controlling behavior. Attempts to control your career, hobbies, appearance, friendships or other aspects of your life may be an early sign of an emotionally abusive relationship. Similarly, while it’s a

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good thing to encourage self-improvement, focusing a lot of attention on trying to change your partner can create tensions that push the boundaries of the relationship into troubled territory.

Overreactions. Strong emotional reactions to seemingly minor comments, gestures or setbacks can all point to anger management challenges. Pay especially close attention to frequent or extreme changes in mood; e.g., behaving lovingly one moment and becoming cruel or enraged the next.

Inequality. A healthy relationship should focus on sharing and caring and is truly a joint effort. But if you or your partner is giving or taking much more than your fair share, it can upset the balance and cause havoc for the relationship.

Threats of violence. Threats to kill or injure, especially those made more than once, can be serious red flags for future domestic violence.

Use of force. Domestic violence often builds up over time. Watch for early signs of violence, such as your partner pushing or restraining you during arguments, or breaking, throwing or striking objects.

To Mend or Move On

If your partner has become physically or emotionally abusive, get help now. An abusive partner can be very manipulative and may try to use guilt, threats, bribery or other tactics to keep you trapped in a cycle of violence and cruelty. In this situation, it's critical that you reach out for the support you need to remove yourself from the situation as quickly as possible. Contact a crisis helpline or your local police department immediately for support, information and insights that can help you understand your options, escape the abuse and reclaim your life.

When breaking up, choose a safe location and be firm that the decision is permanent. If you have any reason to believe that your partner might become violent when you end the relationship, don't put yourself in a potentially dangerous situation. Instead, seek help from a domestic violence organization or your local police department right away.

If you haven't experienced any abuse, but are noticing other signs of the relationship becoming unhealthy, ask yourself whether the partnership is worth saving. If the answer is yes, there are many things you can do to manage or repair your relationship before it becomes worse:

Identify the problem(s). Start by taking a close, honest look at the relationship to recognize the main issues at stake. For example, arguments about your mate working late might really be about trust, communication or not enough time spent together.

Talk it out. While it may be obvious that the relationship is unhealthy, the two of you may not be entirely sure what the root of the problem really is. Sit down with your partner and communicate your feelings, concerns and needs clearly. Avoid blaming, angry confrontation or dwelling on past mistakes. Instead, focus on discussing specific things you both can do to strengthen the relationship going forward.

Be honest and trust your partner. It may be cliché, but honesty and trust really are the foundations of a healthy relationship. Take the time to self-reflect and ask yourself whether you've been fully truthful with yourself and your partner. For example, if you want children but have been telling your partner you don't simply to go along with his or her wishes, the deception will only lead to resentment, conflict or unhappiness down the road. If you can't be completely honest with your partner, especially about the important things, it may be time to move on from the relationship.

Trust is something that should never be taken lightly. If you or your partner has been caught lying, cheating or has done something to break the other's confidence, the issue needs to be aired openly. Sit down with each other to figure out whether you're willing and able to work through the concerns and move past them.

Be supportive. Even if you don’t share all of your partner’s passions, try to show support in your loved one’s career, hobbies and interests. Ask about your partner’s personal and professional goals, and look for ways to support and encourage his or her success.

Share activities. Couples who share interests and experiences often have stronger relationships. Look for activities you can enjoy together, such as dancing, gardening, traveling, attending events or other hobbies.

Accept what you can’t change. Even in the best relationship, your partner will have some bad habits, personality quirks and views or interests that you don’t appreciate. While you might be able to encourage some change, trying to turn your partner into a "new and improved" model, will usually end in frustration. Unless these traits are relationship deal breakers, learn to accept your partner as he or she is and find ways to focus on the positives.

Get professional help. Counselling and professional services can provide you with valuable tools and resources to help you deal with a full range of relationship concerns. These services can connect you to information and resources—individually or as a couple—to improve communication, build trust and resolve the issues preventing you from having a close, healthy and loving relationship.

Whether you choose to begin a new relationship, or repair a long-standing one, any successful partnership takes time, compromise and a strong mutual commitment. But regardless of the relationship you choose, you deserve to be with someone who supports your ambitions, respects you for who you are and, in doing so, makes you happy.