

Surviving College 101

Relationships

Student Workbook



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Table of Contents

Section	Page Number
Why Do We Want Relationships	3
Healthy Relationships	4
Relationship Values	6
Values Compass Guiding Questions	7
Common Values	8
Blank Values Compass	10
Identifying Your Boundaries	11
My Boundaries Worksheet	12
Setting Boundaries	13
Communication	14
Communication Inventory	15
Aggressive/Passive/P-A/Assertive	16
Communication Styles Chart	18
Communication Practice	19
Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Skills	20
Listening Skills	21
Barriers to Communication	22
Correcting Barriers to Communication	23
Relationship Conflict	24
Unhelpful Behavioral Reactions & The Four Horseman	25
Emotional Reactions	26

Relationships 101

This session is intended to help increase your understanding and knowledge about how to build and maintain healthy, effective relationships. The goal is to provide you with some skills that build connection and intimacy in your relationships. The seminar will provide you with life-long tools you can use in all of your important relationships whether with family, friends, colleagues, or romantic partners.

Why do we want Relationships?

If you're here, it likely means that there is **something you want to examine or change about your current relationships**. Maybe you're having difficulty connecting with others or you're noticing that one or more of your relationships feels like it is not working.

Many of us desire positive connections! But why do we even want relationships in the first place? Let's take a moment to talk about the impact that relationships can have on us.

Positive relationships can be beneficial to us in a number of ways, both physically and mentally. **Research suggest that feeling connected to others improves our immune system, blood pressure, and healing after injury. Additionally, it can improve self-esteem, mood, and stress levels.**

Poor relationships or connections have been shown to negatively impact people in a lot of ways, including **increasing blood pressure and our chances of getting ill**. They can also **negatively impact our mood**, exacerbating sadness, stress, and loneliness.

Take a moment to think about some of the important relationships in your life. Who do you feel loved and supported by? The ones you feel you can be completely yourself around without any worries of judgement or condemnation.

Who came to mind when you thought about these qualities of a relationship? Briefly describe what your relationship is like with that person.

Now take a moment to think about a relationship in your life that causes you stress. A relationship in which you do not feel loved, supported, or understood. One in which you must change who you are or how you behave in order to “keep the peace”.

Did anyone come to mind when you thought about these relationships? Briefly describe what your relationship is like with that person.

As we talked about the qualities of these two different types of relationships in our lives, the patterns of healthy versus unhealthy relationships began to emerge. Our first goal today is to help us evaluate the healthiness of the current relationships in our lives and to identify what we want as we build new relationships in the future. Let’s begin by talking about the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Healthy Relationships

The diagram on the next page highlights the difference between Healthy versus Unhealthy Relationships. Healthy relationships are rooted in love and mutual respect while unhealthy relationships are rooted in power and control.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Relationships

Everyone deserves to have healthy relationships with their friends, family, and the people they are dating. Relationships aren't always easy, but there is never an excuse for abuse of any type within a relationship. Healthy relationships are built on a foundation of respect. Knowing the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships can help you build new relationships in college.

Healthy relationships are based on the following to create a nurturing and loving environment:

Mutual respect	-Listening non-judgmentally -Valuing each other's opinions	Separate identities	-Having friends outside the relationship -Exploring your individual identities
Trust and support	-Respecting each other's personal space and time -Overcoming issues of jealousy and resentment	Good communication	-Being honest with your feelings to yourself and your partner -Communicating openly and truthfully
Honesty	-Accepting responsibility for yourself	Forgiveness	-Forgiving past mistakes -Admitting your own mistakes and apologizing
Fairness and equality	-Being willing to compromise -Seeking goals that satisfy both partners	Fighting fair	-Listening to each other -Not assuming things -Not criticizing each other

Unhealthy relationships often use the following to gain power and control:

Isolation	-Controlling where you go and who you see -Making you believe they are the only one who cares about you -Limiting activities outside the relationship	Threats	-Making threats to hurt you, family, friends, belongings, or pets -Threatening to leave or commit suicide
Intimidation	-Making you afraid to use certain looks, actions, or gestures -Destroying property, abusing pets, displaying weapons	Forcible Sex	-Manipulating or making threats in order to get sex -Getting you drunk or drugging you to get sex
Physical, emotional, financial, and/or abuse	-Hitting, pushing, slapping, or kicking -Putting you down _playing mind games -Making you feel guilty -Using monetary means to control your decisions or actions	Minimizing and Denying	-Being unwilling to take responsibility for the abuse -Making light of the abuse -Blaming the abuse on you

Relationship Values

In addition to some standard traits that are present in healthy relationships, people should also be aware of their own relationship values. So, let's really begin to look at your relationship values, remembering that in order to create relationships that feel meaningful, we need to have a sense of our needs and wants.

When we're talking about values, we mean the things that you need in order to feel as though you are living life in an authentic way. **Values are the firmly held beliefs about what gives you, and your relationships with those around you, meaning.** So a core value might be something like faithfulness or humor. Values can overlap with traits of a healthy relationship, but they do not have to.

You might find that your values vary from one relationship to another. For instance, in a classmate, you might greatly value being hardworking. Conversely, in a friendship, you might value someone whom is supportive and kindhearted. And, because relationships are complicated, there might be different values that you have during different times in the same relationship. Perhaps humor is extremely important to you, but it takes a backseat to "supportive" when you are feeling sad and need some support.

Let's take a few minutes for you to begin to identify some of the values that you have for your relationships. Please see to the values compass on **page 7**. For additional help identifying values, **pages 8-9** include a common list of values that people may have. Take some time to begin the blank values compass on **page 10**. Start with one of the relationship types that feels most important to you and complete as much as you can. As you complete the worksheet, you might find that there are some relationships that aren't applicable or important to your life, and that's okay.

Values Compass

Values are what we find meaningful and important in order to live an authentic life. They are different for everybody, and can change over time. Values are different from goals. Put simply, goals can be 'achieved' whereas values are more like compass directions that we want to head in. For example, we might have the goal of getting to all your classes, which sits within the value of 'being a good student.'

Some people value the domains below. Leaving aside any obstacles for the moment, think about what is important to you and what you think makes for a meaningful life that you could value.

Family

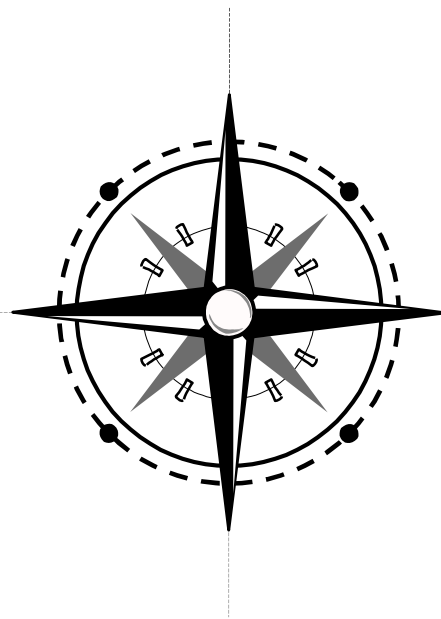
What kind of relationships do you want with your family? What kind of parent/sibling/family member do you want to be? What characteristics are important in your family members?

Friendships/Social

What sort of friend do you want to be? How would you like to act towards your friends? What characteristics are important in your friends?

Romantic/Intimate

What kind of romantic or intimate partner do you want to be? What quality of relationship do you want to be a part of? What characteristics are important in your intimate or romantic partners?



Community

What type of relationships in your community would you like to build (i.e., spiritual, neighbors)? What characteristics are important in your community members?

Employment

What qualities do you want to bring as an employee? What kind of work relationships would you like to build? What characteristics are important in your coworkers?

Education/Training

What qualities do you want to bring as a student? What kind of educational relationships would you like to build? What characteristics are important in your classmates and instructors?

Common Values

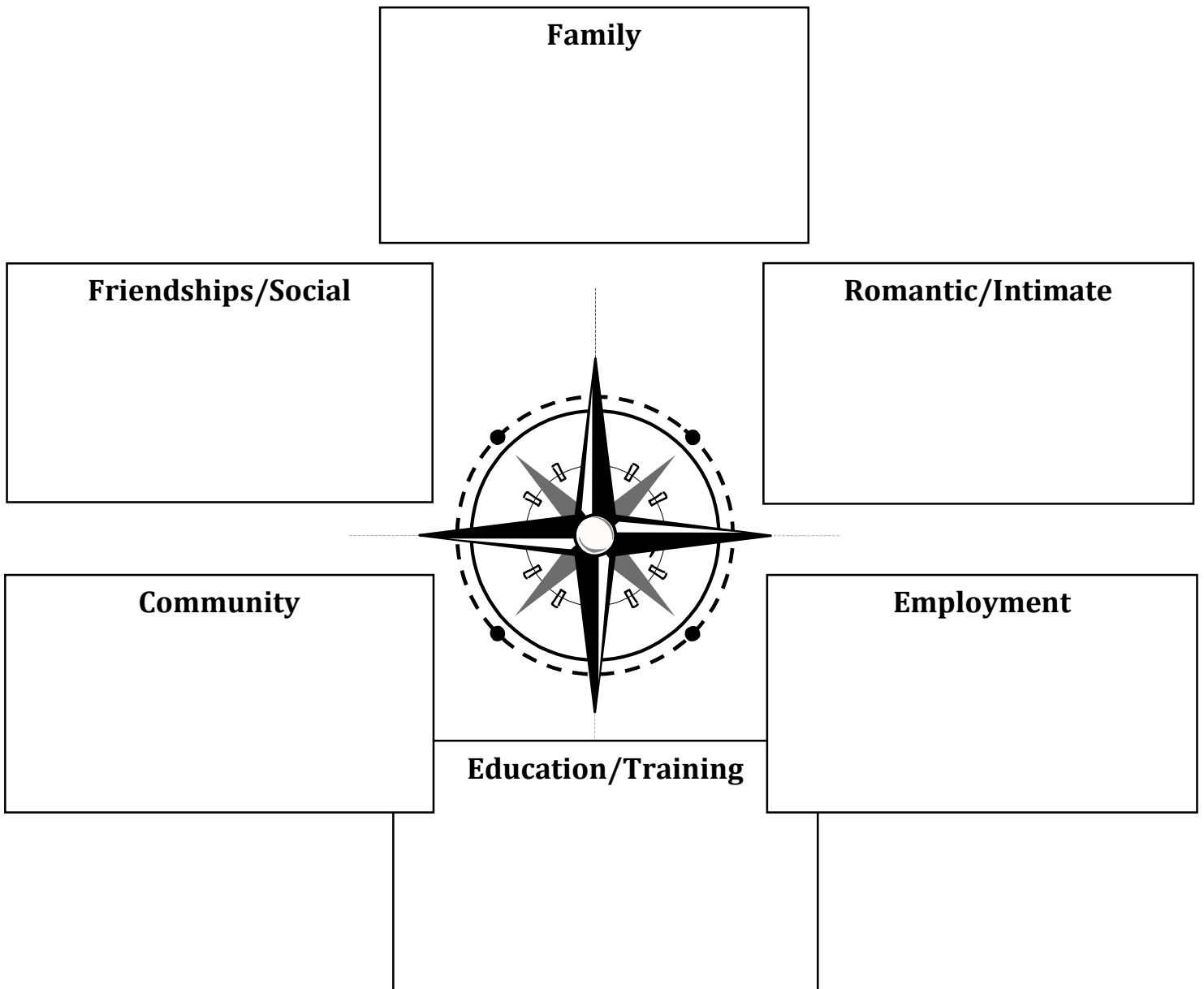
1. **Acceptance:** to be open to and accepting of myself, others, life, etc.
2. **Adventure:** to actively seek, create, or explore novel experiences
3. **Assertiveness:** to respectfully stand up for my rights and what I want
4. **Authenticity:** to be authentic, genuine, real; to be true to myself
5. **Beauty:** to appreciate, create, nurture or cultivate beauty in myself, others, the environment, etc.
6. **Caring:** to be caring towards myself, others, the environment, etc.
7. **Challenge:** to keep challenging myself to grow, learn, improve
8. **Compassion:** to act with kindness towards those who are suffering
9. **Connection:** to engage fully in what I am doing and be present with others
10. **Contribution:** to help or make a positive difference to others or myself
11. **Conformity:** to be respectful and obedient of rules and obligations
12. **Cooperation:** to be cooperative and collaborative with others
13. **Courage:** to be brave; to persist in the face of fear or difficulty
14. **Creativity:** to be creative or innovative
15. **Curiosity:** to be open-minded and interested; to explore and discover
16. **Encouragement:** to encourage behavior that I value in others or myself
17. **Equality:** to treat others as equal to myself, and vice-versa
18. **Excitement:** to seek, create, and engage in activities that are stimulating or thrilling
19. **Fairness:** to be fair to others or myself
20. **Fitness:** to maintain, improve, and look after my physical and mental health and wellbeing
21. **Flexibility:** to adjust and adapt readily to changing circumstances
22. **Freedom:** to choose how I live and behave, or help others do likewise
23. **Friendliness:** to be friendly, companionable, or agreeable towards others
24. **Forgiveness:** to be forgiving towards others or myself
25. **Fun:** to be fun loving; to seek, create, and engage in fun-filled activities
26. **Generosity:** to be generous, sharing and giving, to others or myself
27. **Gratitude:** to be appreciative of myself, others and life
28. **Honesty:** to be honest, truthful, and sincere with others and myself
29. **Humor:** to see and appreciate the humorous side of life
30. **Humility:** to be humble or modest; to let my achievements speak for themselves
31. **Industry:** to be industrious, hard-working, dedicated
32. **Independence:** to be self-supportive and choose my own way of doing things
33. **Intimacy:** to open up, reveal, and share myself -- emotionally or physically – in my close relationships
34. **Justice:** to uphold justice and fairness for myself and others
35. **Kindness:** to be compassionate, considerate, nurturing or caring towards myself and others
36. **Love:** to act lovingly or affectionately towards myself and others
37. **Mindfulness:** to be open to and curious about my present, here-and-now experience
38. **Order:** to be orderly and organized
39. **Open-mindedness:** to think things through, see things from other's points of view, and weigh evidence fairly

40. **Patience:** to remain calm during difficult times
41. **Persistence:** to continue resolutely, despite problems or difficulties
42. **Pleasure:** to create and give pleasure to others or myself
43. **Power:** the ability to direct or influence the behavior of others, such as taking charge, leading, organizing
44. **Reciprocity:** to build relationships with a balance of giving and taking
45. **Respect:** to be polite, considerate and show myself and others positive regard
46. **Responsibility:** to be responsible and accountable for my actions
47. **Romance:** to be romantic; to display and express love or strong affection for another person
48. **Safety:** to secure, protect, or ensure the wellbeing of others or myself
49. **Self-awareness:** to be aware of my own thoughts, feelings and actions
50. **Self-care:** to look after my health and wellbeing and get my needs met
51. **Self-development:** to keep growing, advancing or improving in knowledge, skills, character, or life experience.
52. **Self-control:** to act in accordance with my own ideals
53. **Sensuality:** to create, explore and enjoy experiences that stimulate my senses
54. **Sexuality:** to explore or express my sexuality
55. **Spirituality:** to connect with things bigger than myself
56. **Skillfulness:** to continually practice and improve my skills, and apply myself fully when using them
57. **Supportiveness:** to be helpful, encouraging, and available to others or myself
58. **Trust:** to be trustworthy; to be loyal, faithful, sincere, and reliable

Blank Values Compass

For each of these domains, write a quick summary of your values or list of your values, such as, “humor, support, to be a good friend to people who need me, and to enjoy my time with the people I love” (friendships).

Rate each domain for how important it is to you from 0-10 (0=not important)



Identifying your Boundaries

We've all heard about boundaries, right? For those of you who haven't spent time thinking about it...or have never even heard the term...boundaries are the things that we are willing to accept and not willing to accept in relationships. The amount of intimacy and autonomy that we want or need in our relationships is one area where we may establish boundaries. Boundaries come up in lots of different areas, like what we're okay with physically, including things like hugging or how we like our personal space to be kept. It may also be what we're sexually okay with or what we are okay with emotionally. Our boundaries come up a lot when we are making or sustaining relationships! After all, we often need to consider what we are okay with physically, sexually, and emotionally in our relationships!

People's boundaries can vary quite a bit for lots of different reasons, from cultural expectations to family upbringing or personality. And, you might notice that people's boundaries might change from situation to situation. For instance, you might be perfectly fine with your sibling going through your closet to borrow clothes but get really upset if the person across the hall that you barely know tries to!

Identifying our boundaries is an important part of developing and maintaining relationships. Think of boundaries like a "no trespassing" sign. Those signs tell you just how far you can go and what is off-limits. Boundaries work the same way, telling us what is okay in our relationships and what is off limits or unacceptable. When we notice that someone is not respecting our boundaries, or if we don't follow our own boundaries, we may notice that something isn't quite working. We may feel taken advantage of, frustrated, disconnected, or confused. So it's easy to see why boundaries are so important! The really good news is that when you identified the characteristics of healthy relationships and your values you likely already started to consider or form your boundaries!

As we mentioned, different people can have widely different boundaries. Some folks have really open boundaries, which may make it easier to depend on others but harder to set limits with others. Some folks have really rigid boundaries, which can make it easier to have a sense of independence but make it more challenging to get close to others. Establishing healthy boundaries involves finding a balance of being open to others while setting limits that leave you feeling secure. Does that make sense to everyone? Take a moment to identify your boundaries for the following relationships on **page 12.**

My Boundaries

Boundaries are the rules or limits that we set for ourselves. An important part of building and maintaining relationships is identifying our limits. For the relationships listed below, take a moment to consider your personal limits related to **physical touch, personal space, and emotions**. If a relationship does not apply to you, consider how you might want a relationship of that type to look.

Parents/Guardians: _____

Siblings: _____

Romantic Partners: _____

Roommates: _____

Classmates: _____

Professors: _____

Friends: _____

Setting Boundaries

How comfortable to do you feel about setting boundaries in relationships? What keeps you from being able to set healthy boundaries? Establishing and setting boundaries can be uncomfortable or even difficult for people. Below are a few key points to help you communicate and set your boundaries in a relationship.

What to Say: You always have the right to say “no”. When doing so, express yourself clearly and without ambiguity so there is no doubt what you want.

“I’m not comfortable with this”	“Please don’t do that”	“Not at this time”	“I can’t do that for you”
“This doesn’t work for me”	“I’ve decided not to”	“This is not acceptable”	“I’m drawing the line at ____”
“I don’t want to do that”			

What to do:

Use Confident Body Language: Face the other person, make eye contact, and use a steady tone of voice at an appropriate volume (not too quiet, and not too loud).	Be Respectful: Avoid yelling, using put-downs, or giving the silent treatment. It’s okay to be firm, but your message will be better received if you are respectful.
Plan Ahead: Think about what you want to say, and how you will say it, before entering a difficult discussion. This can help you feel more confident about your position.	Compromise: When appropriate, listen and consider the needs of the other person. You never have to compromise, but give-and-take is part of any healthy relationship.

Let’s take a look at some examples of setting boundaries below before practicing on your own.

Examples:

Situation: You notice your roommate has been eating your food in the fridge. You never discussed plans to share food, and don’t want them eating what you bought.
Response: “I’d like to keep our food separate. If there is something of mind that you want, please ask me before taking it.”

Situation: Your friend calls you at 11pm to discuss issues she is having with her boyfriend. You need to wake up at 6am.
Response: “I can tell you’re upset. I want to talk to you, but I need to go to bed. Maybe we can talk tomorrow afternoon.”

Practice:

Situation: You invited a friend over for the evening, but now it's getting late. You would like to get ready for bed, but your friend seems unaware of how late it is.

Response:

Situation: A good friend asks you on a date. You are not interested in being more than friends. You would like to let them down clearly, but gently.

Response:

Situation: You missed several days of work due to a medical condition. When you get back at work a co-worker asks you what happen. You feel this information is personal, and not want to share.

Response:

Communication

Now let's shift our discussion to communication. Communication is the cornerstone of making our values and needs in relationships known. It is important for creating new relationships as well as maintaining our existing ones.

Communication is not only the words that we speak, but how we say them, including our non-verbal communication, like eye contact or tone of voice. Communication also occurs when we choose not to interact with others, like when we choose not to say "Hi" to our classmates. We might communicate well or communicate poorly, but we cannot NOT communicate, even when we remain silent. Additionally, while good communication may not resolve all problems, problems cannot be resolved without good communication.

Let's take an inventory of how your communication currently works by completing the questions below.

As you're filling it out, here are some things to ask yourself:

- In what ways are you communicating well?
- How about ways that you are communicating poorly? For instance, do you find your communication is better with strangers or people you know?
- Are you better at specific types of communication than others? For example, are you are better at "getting to know you" talk than you are at conflict?
- How effective are you at making your values known?

Take some time to develop a list of your strengths and areas of growth in communication. Remember, having a sense of yourself, including areas of growth, is key to developing healthy relationships.

Communication Inventory

The following questions are to help you begin to explore your communication strengths and areas of growth. To help you reflect on questions 1 and 2, think about your communication as it relates to: the people with whom you communicate, your physical and emotional state, time of day, and the type of communication as starting points.

1. When do you communicate well? (i.e., when I've had time to think, in the mornings)

2. When do you communicate poorly? (i.e., when tired, with my family)

To help you reflect on questions 3 and 4, think about: your tone of voice, level of speaking, body language, and behaviors surrounding your language as starting points.

3. What does your good communication look like? (i.e., calm tone, I listen)

4. What does your poor communication look like? (i.e., the silent treatment, slamming doors, etc.)

Aggressive/Passive/P-A/Assertive

Let's explore different types of communication: on the next page there is a helpful handout that breaks down each of these types of communication.

The first is "**passive**" communication. In this type of communication, someone avoids expressing their opinions, needs, or values. Often, the **person prioritizes the needs, values, and opinions of others over their own**. So, for example, a passive communicator won't tell their partner that they were hurt when their partner broke a promise, because they are concerned that expressing their feelings might hurt their partner or they may hope that their partner can tell what they are feeling without them saying it. In this style, frustrations tend to build, **sometimes resulting in outbursts over time**.

Passive communication is like a pressure cooker. Frustration and hurt (the pressure) builds and builds. Without release of some of the frustration, the pressure boils over, leading them to explode. After these explosions, they can feel really guilty, often causing them to avoid expressing themselves all over again, repeating the cycle.

Can you think of a time when you have communicated in a passive way? Or perhaps a time when you've noticed that someone else is communicating in a passive way?

Okay. So, conversely, "**aggressive**" communicators are very comfortable expressing their needs, values, and opinions. Often times, they might **struggle to see the needs, values, and opinions of others**. For example, if an aggressive communicator was upset because their partner broke a promise, they might yell, blame, or criticize them and interrupt their partner when they attempt to speak. This kind of communication **can also include different types of abuse** (verbal, physical, sexual, etc.).




Imagine aggressive communication to be like a raging fire. Aggression (the fire) spreads and takes over everything in its path, even if that means hurting others, kind of like a raging fire may destroy homes or surrounding nature when it spreads.

Have you ever communicated with someone who uses this type of communication?

The next style is "**passive-aggressive**" communication. You may notice that this style of communication is not listed on your handout. This is because, as the name implies, this style combines passive and aggressive traits. In this style, the communicator **appears passive, but communicates in subtle or indirect ways that show anger**. For example, if their partner broke a promise, a passive-aggressive communicator might feel angry but tell their partner that they aren't angry. In the meantime, they might act sarcastically towards their partner or conveniently "forget" to respond to their partner's text messages. Typically, when someone uses this type of communication, they may be feeling resentful or stuck but uncomfortable expressing their feelings directly, so it comes out in other ways.

Finally, there's "**assertive**" communication. This communication style, like aggressive communication, involves **being able to express** your values, needs, and desires. Unlike aggressive communication, though, assertive communication **respects the values and needs of the other person**. If an assertive communicator were hurt by their partner breaking a promise, they might calmly tell them, "I felt hurt when you broke your promise and would like for you to keep promises in the future." They would also be open to hearing their partner's perspective and having a conversation about it. **When someone is assertive, they do not have the expectation that they will always get what they want**. Instead, the value in assertive communication is making your needs and desires known in a clear way while respecting input from others.

Communication Styles

	Passive	Assertive	Aggressive
			
General	Compliant, submissive, talks little, vague non-committal communication, puts self down, praises others <i>"I don't mind...that's fine...yes alright"</i>	Actions and expressions fit with words spoken, firm but polite and clear messages, respectful of self and others <i>"That's a good idea, and how about if we did this too..." or "I can see that, but I'd really like..."</i>	Sarcastic, harsh, always right, superior, know it all, interrupts, talks over others, critical, put-downs, patronising, disrespectful of others <i>"This is what we're doing, if you don't like it, tough"</i>
Beliefs	You're okay, I'm not Has no opinion other than that the other person/s are always more important, so it doesn't matter what they think anyway	I'm okay, you're okay Believes or acts as if all the individuals involved are equal, each deserving of respect, and no more entitled than the other to have things done their way	I'm okay, you're not Believe they are entitled to have things done their way, the way they want it to be done, because they are right, and others (and their needs) are less important
Eyes	Avoids eye contact, looks down, teary, pleading	Warm, welcoming, friendly, comfortable eye contact	Narrow, emotion-less, staring, expressionless
Posture	Makes body smaller – stooped, leaning, hunched shoulders	Relaxed, open, welcoming	Makes body bigger – upright, head high, shoulders out, hands on hips, feet apart
Hands	Together, fidgety, clammy	Open, friendly and appropriate gestures	Pointing fingers, making fists, clenched, hands on hips
Consequences	Give in to others, don't get what we want or need, self-critical thoughts, miserable	Good relationships with others, happy with outcome and to compromise	Make enemies, upset others and self, feel angry and resentful

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Communication Practice

Okay, now that we are aware of the different styles of communication let's see what they look like using the following example:

Example: Sally is unhappy with James because he told a secret that Sally told James in confidence.

Passive Response:	Aggressive Response:	Passive/Aggressive Response:	Assertive Response:
<i>Sally doesn't say anything. When James mentions what he said to Sally, she thinks to herself, "That's okay, he didn't mean anything by it."</i>	<i>Sally find James in the Union and yells at him, saying "You're the worst friend! What is wrong with you?!" When James attempts to respond, Sally yells over him.</i>	<i>Sally doesn't confront James. She is sarcastic with James for a week after the event but denies that anything is wrong when he asks her.</i>	<i>Sally talks with James in private, saying in a calm voice, "I was hurt and angry when you told your friends about my secret. It feels like it is hard to trust you now."</i>

Considering the following questions, what might your reactions be?

- If you were in Sally's place, how would you feel if you responded as Sally does above? Would you feel more or less connected to the person speaking?
- If you were in James' place, how would you feel if Sally addressed you in this way? Would you feel more or less connected to the person on the receiving end?

As we can see from this example, different forms of communication can impact the level of connection that we feel towards one another and our responses.

While we generally encourage assertive communication, it does not mean that the other types of communication are not needed at certain times. For instance, if you are faced with someone whom is extremely aggressive, it might be more challenging or potentially unsafe to be assertive. Passive

communication might be a better way to communicate until you can get to a safer situation.

We also want to acknowledge that being assertive doesn't mean that we won't experience strong emotions, like anger. We want to acknowledge that our strong feelings can be really helpful! **Emotions can give us important information** about our experiences, which may help us recognize our needs, goals, and desires. Also, even when having strong emotions, we can choose **how we express** these emotions, whether we choose to give someone the silent treatment, share our feelings, or yell. These reactions can impact connection, as we saw in our worksheet.

We can see that different communication styles can impact others in various ways. We can't control how our partner feels but we can definitely choose a communication style that has a greater chance of being effective in a given situation.

Verbal & Non-Verbal Communication Skills

Below are additional communication skills which are both verbal AND non-verbal. What communication skills do you do well? Are there areas where you struggle? Select a technique that you would like to practice.

1. **Attending:** Orienting yourself towards the person speaking.
2. **Eye Contact:** Making contact, but not staring. Respect cultural differences.
3. **Facial Expressions:** Consistent with tone of conversation.
4. **Voice:** Monitor tone, volume, pauses, speed.
5. **Using I.** Focus on your experience and point of view.



6. **Saying No.** Setting limits for yourself where you need to.
7. **Use Humor.** When appropriate, humor can break down barriers.
8. **Organize.** Have a sense of your points in the communication while remaining open to what the other person is communicating.
9. **Be Clear.** Speak directly in order to avoid confusion or misunderstandings.
10. **Listen.** Remember that communication involves giving and receiving information.



Listening Skills

One important aspect of communication isn't about speaking at all. It's about how we're listening to others around us! We'd like to highlight listening because it's often overlooked when we think about how we're connecting with others. We can get so focused on our message or conveying our message to the other person that we stop being present in the moment and miss out on what the other person is saying and experiencing. Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone new, but you're so caught up in what you're saying, how you're saying it, and your "end goal" for the conversation, that you forget to actually listen to what the person was saying? It's easy for this to happen, especially when we meet new people, are preoccupied, or feel passionate about our own perspective.

What does good listening even look like? How do we attend to another person's experience? Let's look at a few more ways that we can meaningfully listen below. While reviewing this list, please star or circle a skill that you would like to practice.

1. **Check In.** Check in with yourself. Notice if now is a time when you can commit to listening. If not, gently ask for a rain check to continue the discussion at another time.
2. **Prepare.** Prior to listening, put other things out of your mind and focus on staying present.
3. **Stop Talking.** Don't interrupt, talk over, or complete someone's sentences.
4. **Delivery.** Pay attention to how someone is communicating (i.e., tone, volume), as it can provide useful information about emotions.
5. **Empathize.** Attempt to see the person's perspective and keep an open mind.
6. **Enhancers.** Use your nonverbals to show you are listening. Smile, nod, or use "uh huh" while the other person is talking.
7. **Focus.** Don't pay attention to other tasks, interests, etc. Focus on the speaker's words.
8. **Be Patient.** Don't jump in to speak the second that there is a pause. Wait until you know the person is done speaking (it's okay to ask in a gentle way!)
9. **Nonverbals.** Attend to gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbals, which are important cues in communication.
10. **Avoid judgement.** People communicate in different ways. Focus on the communicator's meaning, instead of rejecting the message based on how it is said or the person who said it.
11. **Label words.** Make a mental image of what you are being told (this helps you remember it later).
12. **Reflect.** Paraphrase or reflect what you heard to make sure you got it right.

Barriers to Communication

There are many barriers to communication, like rehearsing what you're going to say instead of listening, listening with the intention of disagreeing, our surroundings, or our emotional state. Let's take a look at the list below to start identifying some things that get in the way of good communication with others. Please star, circle, or highlight the barriers that you experience.

1. **Mind Reading.** Assuming you know what someone else means, often before they complete their statement.
2. **Physical:** Objects or distractions get in the way.
3. **Rehearsing.** Focusing on what you will say next (instead of listening).
4. **Non-verbals:** When your words and nonverbal signals are inconsistent.
5. **Distraction/Daydreaming.** Focusing on things outside the conversation.
6. **Judging.** Making judgements about what is being said or about the speaker.
7. **Filtering.** Selective listening. Hearing what you want to and ignoring the rest.
8. **Sparring.** Listening just so you can disagree.
9. **Derailing.** Changing the subject or making jokes, especially when uncomfortable with the topic.
10. **Misperceptions:** Misunderstanding what someone is saying when they speak.
11. **Culture/Language:** Different beliefs about experiences, relating, and what is “right” or “wrong” in communication.
12. **Superficial:** Having a hard time accessing experiences beyond surface level.
13. **Advising.** Wanting to “fix” or offer needless advice.
14. **Placating.** Too quickly agreeing, sometimes as a way to make the other person stop talking.
15. **Dumping:** Purging concerns without space for the other person to communicate.
16. **Being Right.** Focusing on proving that you are not wrong, often times without taking into consideration the other person’s feelings or experience.
17. **Boredom.** Either due to the topic or because you’ve been listening for prolonged periods.
18. **Heightened Emotions.** It can be challenging to attend to a conversation when you’re emotionally activated (positively or negatively).

Correcting Barriers to Communication

Now that you have identified factors that might get in the way of your communication and connecting with others, let's look at some ways that we can "trouble shoot" each of these. Let's take a look below at some things we can do. As you review these, please star, circle, or highlight the tips you plan to try.

**One of the first steps for correcting these barriers is to engage in self-reflection and notice when you may be doing them. Additionally, the following are helpful tools:

1. **Mind Reading.** Allow someone to finish their statement before speaking.
2. **Physical:** Try to have face-to-face conversations. Put distractions away. Gently ask to have the conversation at another time if you cannot avoid the distractions.
3. **Rehearsing.** Practice focusing on the communicator's words and paraphrase what is said.
4. **Non-verbals:** Pay attention to your actions as well as your words. Self check-in about your emotional state. Remember culture impacts the meaning of many non-verbals.
5. **Distraction/Daydreaming.** Self check-in to see if now is a good time to talk. If not, ask to speak later. If you cannot delay, practice visualizing the words in your head.
6. **Judging.** Attempt to suspend judgement, checking in with where the judgment comes from. Focus on your disagreement with the message, not judgement of the person.
7. **Filtering.** Highlight to yourself the items that you may typically ignore.
8. **Sparring.** Attempt to understand the person's message
9. **Derailing.** Respond on-point to what was said, or avoid making commentary and use enhancers if you are unable.
10. **Misperceptions:** Ask for clarification or clarify what you meant.
11. **Culture/Language:** Take steps to understand cultural differences. Ask for clarification when it seems that there might be a difference. Avoid judgement—there is no one "right" way to communicate.
12. **Superficial:** Self-Reflection: check in with how you're feeling, what you think, and if you want to share those with the other person.
13. **Advising.** Try to refrain from giving advice until asked. Step back and be supportive. Let them know you are there if needed.
14. **Placating.** Too quickly agreeing, sometimes as a way to make the other person stop talking.
15. **Dumping:** If you are dumping, notice about how much time/space you have taken up. Set goals to scale back. If you're receiving, set boundaries where you can (i.e., set a time limit).
16. **Being Right.** Focus on the other person's feelings or experience. You may disagree about something, but everyone's feelings are valid.
17. **Boredom.** Self check-in to see if now is a good time to talk. If not, ask to speak later. If you can't delay, practice visualizing the person's words in your head.
18. **Heightened Emotions.** Let the other person know that right now is not a good time but you are happy to talk later. Find ways to care for your emotions to prevent them from negatively affecting communication.

Relationship Conflict

When relationships first form, including with classmates, significant others, friends, or any other relationship, many of us go through what is called a “honeymoon phase” where we idealize our partners. Early on, we tend to have high tolerance and even appreciation for the differences between us and our partners, and we may present the best sides of our selves behaviorally and emotionally (maybe we are less reactive or moody; maybe more understanding, agreeable, and fun). But over time, **differences between partners can cause frustration and conflict**. We may see these differences as intolerable or bad. And, out of frustration or other emotions, we may act in ways towards our partners that lead to more conflict, power struggles, less overall satisfaction, and more emotional pain in relationships.

Let’s look at an example. Let’s say Alex is someone who is conscientious, thoughtful, and who makes decisions carefully. She meets Sam, who is carefree and spontaneous. At first, Alex is really excited by this friendship because she is often encouraged by Sam to do fun things that she has been avoiding, like talking to new people and going to new places. Because she is excited about the relationship, she really wants to put her best self forward. After a while, however, Alex starts to have some regrets, like spending too much money and not focusing on school as much. Sam’s carefree nature, which Alex initially found enjoyable, is now seen as frustrating because Alex feels it gets in the way of what else she feels is important.

We can see in this example where conflict might start to come up, right?

Now, it’s important to know that some amount of conflict is a part of any healthy relationship. During moments of conflict, people may call it quits, thinking that the relationship was never good to begin with. Our goal is not to avoid conflict, but to understand the cause of the conflict, find ways to manage and heal from conflict, and use information gained to figure out if it makes sense to stay in the relationship or not.

While we may need to leave relationships that are unhealthy or abusive, sometimes people call it quits and give up a relationship that is not abusive and could be repaired. For those who continue their relationships, finding ways to **effectively manage conflict can actually deepen intimacy and create lasting, meaningful companionships**.

One of the greatest causes of conflict in relationships are unhelpful perceptions about incompatibilities. **Incompatibilities are conflicts between individuals due to differences in personality, interests, values, etc.** All partners have differences that can lead to incompatibilities. No one is exactly the same, and often, these differences cause frustration at some point.

Importantly, how much our differences lead to incompatibilities and conflict largely depends on **how we perceive and respond to these differences**. So, it is not the differences themselves that cause the greatest conflict, but how we think about those differences. There are several key unhelpful perceptions that lead to conflict escalation, and we will talk about these major perceptions below.

Unhelpful Behavioral Reactions

When we are experiencing relationship conflict, we're often desperate to find ways to resolve the situation. This might mean talking to the other person, ignoring the situation (hoping it gets better), leaving the relationship, or many other responses.

Unfortunately, if we're experiencing the unhelpful perceptions mentioned above, it can lead to problematic behaviors as well. Some people may try to change their partner by making demands, criticisms, withdrawing, guilt, withholding something, or punishing them. While we won't have time to highlight all the problematic behaviors that can come up in conflict, we do want to highlight four especially problematic behaviors. Eminent couple's therapist John Gottman has named these the "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" because these types of communication are common predictors of the end of a relationship. They are: criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.

We want to acknowledge that, with the exception of contempt, these behaviors are seen even in healthy relationships. That is, research shows that most of us do these problematic behaviors to some degree. But, in healthy relationships, these behaviors happen less often and are **REPAIRED, or managed**, more effectively. Of note, contempt is highly predictive of partnerships ending and is essentially non-existent in healthy relationships. Look at the examples below of the Four Horsemen compared to a non-problematic response, a complaint. We'd like you to think about a current important relationship in your life and consider which responses you and your partner use and how these different responses impact your relationship.

Problematic responses- the Four Horsemen:

Criticism: "You talked about yourself all through dinner and didn't ask me anything about my day. How can you treat me this way? What kind of self-centered person are you?"

Defensiveness: "What are you picking on me for? I didn't do anything wrong. What about all the good things I do? I never get any appreciation."

Contempt: "It's not that I could care less, it's that I *couldn't* care less. At least get that right."

Stonewalling: Looking away and no longer taking part in the conversation.

Non-problematic response- a Complaint:

Complaint: "I'm upset that you talked about yourself all through dinner and you didn't ask me anything about my day. That hurts my feelings."

Which problematic responses do you use? How does it impact the intimacy in your relationship? How does it impact conflict in your relationship?

Which problematic responses does your partner use? How do these responses make you feel about yourself and the relationship?

Emotional Reactions leading to Conflict

Some relationship conflict can also arise, or be exacerbated by, our emotional experiences. Now, we're not saying emotions are bad. Emotions are not the problem! However, sometimes the intensity of our emotions and the ways that we express or act upon our emotions can impact or influence conflict. If someone is highly emotionally reactive, then it is difficult for that person to engage in rational thinking and can increase the use of unhelpful perceptions and problematic behaviors. Their fight or flight system may be activated, leading to reactivity, defensiveness, aggressiveness, or withdrawal.

Can you relate to the experience of getting really mad at someone and reacting by yelling loudly, throwing or breaking things, or running out of the house? Maybe you've even done all three! But after 20 minutes have passed, and the anger has subsided, you saw things differently, and perhaps more rationally. Maybe you felt a bit embarrassed about your behavior, you apologize, and are able to see things from a widened perspective. So you can see what we mean about how the intensity of our emotions and how we act on them can impact conflict!

Sometimes strong emotions get the best of us and are difficult to control. And some of us are more prone to strong emotional reactions. Emotional regulation techniques like taking time outs during a fight to come out of fight or flight mode, and relaxation and mindfulness exercises can help you use the other techniques more effectively. Let's take a look at a list of emotion regulation strategies below. As you're reviewing these, circle ones that you'd be willing to try when you feel strong emotions.

- 1. Activities:** Find something you enjoy doing. It can be anything from hiking to watching TV to going shopping.
- 2. Contributing:** Find something nice to do for someone.
- 3. Sensations:** Pay attention to your surroundings using all five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch).



- 4. Relaxation:** Get a massage, take a bath, or find something else that helps you reduce physical tension.
- 5. Distractions:** Find something to take your attention for 10 minutes, with a plan to return to the problem.
- 6. Deep Breathing:** Take 10 slow, deep, breaths. Count to 4 on the in and out breath.
- 7. Mindfulness:** Practice a short mindfulness exercise. You can find

them easily on YouTube or apps like mindfulness coach.

- 8. Opposite Emotions:** Read, watch, or listen to things that evoke the opposite emotion from what you're experiencing.

- 9. Time-Out:** When overwhelmed with emotions, take a ten-minute break and come back.



Summary

In this session we have focused on a number of topics, including identifying why we want relationships, your values related to relationships, the roles of communication and listening, and how we can manage inevitable conflict that comes up in our relationships.

We hope that you have found this session to be helpful. Remember that many of these skills take time and you're still going to need practice. We also encourage you to continue practicing self-compassion. None of us get it "right" all the time and, even with the best of skills, we will still experience conflict or may have challenges connecting with some people. If you need any additional support feel free to reach out to CAPS to schedule an initial consultation appointment by calling 479-575-5276.

