

QUESTIONS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS @ UNI?

RELWELL:
RELATIONSHIP WELLBEING SERVICE, UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

By Abi Early, BSc Psychology University of Essex

We asked our recent grads: What is something you wish you had known about relationships before you started university?

The most important lesson I have learnt regarding relationships is the importance of maintaining your own identity whilst building a relationship with another person. Incorporating your partners' perspectives and resources into your daily life is an essential part of maintaining a relationship and helps to build trust. However, situations will arise where the costs and benefits differ between partners. In this situation, it is important to be able to distinguish between compromising for the good of the relationship, and having your needs and feelings dismissed. Having a strong sense of self and knowing your own personal boundaries can help you navigate these dilemmas within relationships.

Another essential aspect to consider in a relationship is your and your partners wellbeing. It's assumed that receiving support from a partner is always a positive experience. However, there are different types of support, and giving or receiving the wrong type of support can be just as bad as not receiving any. In some situations, you may need instrumental support. This refers to any sort of tangible or physical help that you may receive, for example, helping them carry furniture when they're moving to a new place. In other situations, you may need emotional support. This involves listening and being sympathetic to your partners situation, and instead of trying to solve the situation, you allow them to be vulnerable and feel heard. Whilst instrumental support helps motivate us to reach targets, emotional support allows us to stay on track when moving towards these goals.

Having an understanding that there are individual differences between all people emphasises the importance of communicating with your partner to ensure that you are providing them with the care and support they need, and vice versa. For example, showing support to a partner with low self-esteem will be different to that of a partner with high self-esteem. Understanding that those with low self-esteem typically feel undeserving of positive feedback explains why providing positive feedback can make them feel worse. In these situations, the individual is more likely to want support that validates their negative feelings towards the situation, rather than support that tries to positively reframe the experience.

Overall, knowing the importance of treating your partner as an individual rather than a character that fills a pre-determined position is essential when it comes to relationships. Forgetting these pre-existing beliefs of how a partner should behave and respond in situations will allow you to navigate the relationship in the most accurate way possible. However, the most important thing I have learnt about relationships is that no relationship is worth losing your sense of self. A good relationship allows you to develop and grow as an individual as well as in a partnership.

About the Author: Abi Early completed her BSc in Psychology at the University of Essex in 2023. During her time at Essex, she took a module on the science of relationships with Dr Veronica Lamarche, Director of the University of Essex RelWell Service and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology, and completed her dissertation project on individual differences that shape how we share good news with close others. Since graduating, Abi has gone on to pursue a path towards becoming a Clinical Psychologist. She has begun taking sign language lessons with the intention of working in children's mental health within the deaf community.

About RelWell: RelWell is the Relationship Wellbeing Service at the University of Essex, led by Dr Veronica Lamarche. RelWell is an educational space within the Essex Health, Wellbeing and Care Hubs that promotes relationship wellbeing in the community through workshops, research and other educational initiatives. Follow us on social media (X.com @RelWellEssex; Instagram/Threads @EssexRelWell)

