

Healthy Relationships Reading 25

Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships

The Importance of Human Relationships

The importance of interpersonal relationships was best said by the social psychologist David Johnson in his book Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Self-Actualization: *“The human species seems to have a relationship imperative: We desire and seek out relationships with others, and we have personal needs that can be satisfied only through interacting with other humans. Career success, family success, friendships, and companionships all depend on building and maintaining relationships with other people. In fact, the most distinctive aspects of being alive is the potential for joy, fun, excitement, caring, warmth, and personal fulfillment in our relationships with other people. Making new friends, deepening existing relationships, falling in love, and negotiating alliances with other people to achieve mutual goals—all these give life meaning and richness. How fulfilling, productive, meaningful, and satisfying our lives turn out to be depends on the quality of the relationships we form with other people. There is no way to overstate the importance of interpersonal relationships in our lives”*. In addition, building and maintaining healthy relationships with others is often cited as an essential part of our emotional health. Having healthy relationships with others is largely dependent upon our emotional health, and our emotional health is mainly dependent on our social health, or the ability to have meaningful, satisfying, and healthy relationships with others. If the Covid pandemic has taught us anything, it’s that social isolation has had a tragic effect on the emotional and social health of the nation, especially among our youth.

The Importance of Interpersonal Relationship Skills

For most of us, relationships are among the things we value most. We spend a lot of time in relationships. Misunderstandings, impasses, and conflicts are inevitable. Learning to successfully work through interpersonal conflict may be the most critical skill for personal, family, and career success. It may also be the most challenging skill to learn and do well. As David W. Johnson stated: *“Humans are not born instinctively knowing how to interact effectively with others. Interpersonal and group skills do not magically appear when they are needed. Many children and adolescents lack basic interpersonal skills such as correctly identifying the emotions of others and appropriately resolving a conflict, and often their social ineptitude seems to persist into adulthood”*. Fortunately, skills of self-awareness, self-disclosure, trustworthiness, and the ability to listen effectively, communicate clearly, and resolve interpersonal conflicts can be systematically taught and learned. This module focuses on those skills and the qualities, characteristics, and behaviors of healthy relationships.

Self-Awareness & Healthy Relationships

To have healthy, growth-enhancing relationships, it is essential to be emotionally healthy. The primary emotional health skill is self-awareness. We need to be self-aware and accept our feelings and thoughts, and why. We need to be aware of who we are (our needs, values, strengths, etc.). If we are unaware of or do not accept our feelings or who we are, we will not communicate them to others and will try to hide them from ourselves and others, making it impossible to successfully work through misunderstandings, conflicts, and impasses in relationships. In addition, we need to be self-aware of our styles of managing feelings and conflict, and the impact these coping mechanisms have on us and our relationships. We also need to manage our feelings in healthy ways, especially our feelings of disappointment, frustration, and anger with others, so as not to take them out on them.

Self-Disclosure & Healthy Relationships Reading

Essential to achieving emotional and interpersonal well-being is the willingness and ability to self-disclose. We can attain full health only when we gain the courage to be ourselves with others. This means being able to share our feelings and thoughts with others. The willingness and ability to let ourselves be known to others (to self-disclose) are essential in discovering who we are and how we wish to become, and in the formation of close relationships. A relationship between two people develops as they become more open about themselves — more self-disclosing. If individuals cannot reveal themselves, they cannot become close to others or be valued by others for who they are. To work through misunderstandings, impasses, and conflicts in relationships, we need to be able to share our feelings and why we feel that way with others and be aware of and share our needs.

When self-disclosing, it is important to remember that immediate, uncontrolled expression of feelings is inappropriate. There are effective and ineffective ways of sharing. In addition, there are some things we might not want to share, and there are people we don't trust enough to share parts of who we are with. When sharing, it is essential to consider the positive and negative consequences of self-disclosure.

Benefits of Self-Disclosure

Self-knowledge. It is a psychological truth that we cannot fully know ourselves until we self-disclose our true selves to others. There is something about sharing that makes us understand ourselves better.

The Development and Maintenance of Meaningful Relationships. A relationship between two individuals develops as they become more open about themselves—more self-disclosing. Relationships are based on knowledge of the other person. How can someone like, accept, respect, and love you if they don't know you? Healthy relationships are built on knowledge and self-disclosure. They also require the willingness to trust and be trustworthy. We must trust others before we are willing to reveal our true selves and act in trustworthy ways, before others reveal themselves to us. The willingness to self-disclose is essential to developing and maintaining trust, and failing to reciprocate another's self-disclosure hinders its development.

People in close relationships will have misunderstandings and problems, and will reach impasses, all of which are normal. Self-disclosure of feelings and needs is essential to work through misunderstandings, problems, and impasses. If you hide how you feel or react to the other person, your concealment can sicken the relationship. The energy you pour into hiding adds to the stress in the relationship and dulls your awareness of how you feel.

Risks in Self-Disclosing

Fear of Rejection. Many people are afraid to let themselves be known for fear of rejection—they worry people will laugh at them, ignore them, use the information against them, or leave or break up with them. As a result, people keep to themselves, hiding their real selves, or even creating false selves, trying to convince others that they feel differently or are different from who they really are. Creating a false self is usually lonely and dishonest. The person is not being genuine, and others usually know it. Often, when a person is rejected, it is not a rejection of the real person (which is hidden) but of the false self. People are unwilling to let their true selves be known because they have been conditioned to believe in impossible concepts of how we ought to be. These concepts make us ashamed of our true feelings and our true being. Thus, we often feel like we “should” be different. Because most people are at least a little insecure, and because all people need to be liked, loved, and respected by others, we often go along with what others say or want, keeping our feelings to ourselves for fear of rejection. Hiding from others because of fear of rejection and conflict, or through feelings of shame and guilt, leads to loneliness. Being silent is not being strong: strength is the willingness to take risks in relationships to disclose ourselves with the intention of building a better relationship.

Discovering things about ourselves that we do not like. Because self-disclosure increases self-knowledge, we may discover aspects of our lives and relationships that we don’t feel good about. Once known, we are confronted with either changing (which can be difficult) or not changing and remaining unhappy. One way to stay unaware is to avoid self-disclosing.

*I am afraid to tell you who I am,
because, if I tell you who I am,
you may not like who I am,
And it's all that I have*

John Powell

Trust & Self-Disclosure in Healthy Relationships

Healthy relationships require the willingness to trust and be trustworthy. We must trust others before we are willing to reveal ourselves (self-disclose) to them, and we must act in trustworthy ways before others reveal themselves to us. Getting to know others and for others to know us (who we really are) requires self-disclosure. The willingness and ability to self-disclose are essential to developing and maintaining trust, and failing to reciprocate another’s self-disclosure hinders its development. If we want to be liked, accepted, respected, and loved for who we are, we need to let others know our true selves. The ability and willingness to self-disclose is also essential in knowing who and how we are, and our ability to work through misunderstandings, conflicts, and impasses in relationships

Essential Interpersonal Communication Skills

Learning to successfully work through misunderstanding and interpersonal conflict may be the most essential skill for personal, family, and career success. It may also be the most challenging skill to learn and do well. These are complex skills that need to be practiced repeatedly until mastered. Outlined below are the essential interpersonal communication skills addressed in this module. To communicate effectively and to successfully work through misunderstandings, impasses, and conflicts in relationships, we need to:

1. Be aware of what we feel and think and why we feel and think this way. We need to understand our needs and values (**self-awareness**).
2. Be an effective listener and communicate that we are listening to know and understand others (**passive & active listening**).
3. Be skillful in asking **clarifying & inquiry questions** when we don't fully understand.
4. Speak in ways that will make others want to listen to us, understand us, consider what we have to say, and possibly change their behavior to help meet our needs (**I Statements**).
5. Be **assertive** when being pressured to do something we don't want to do.
6. Be skilled at having difficult conversations with people to resolve misunderstandings, impasses, and conflicts in relationships (**interpersonal conflict resolution skills**).