

**A Space
to talk
about ...**

Relationships

In this handout, we use the word 'relationship' in a general way to include family ties, friendships, more romantic relationships and those with teachers, school staff and other adults. The word 'relationship' comes from 'relate' - relating to others, and to our 'self,' is what it's all about!

Introduction

Over the course of our lifetime, we will have many different kinds of relationships. For instance, some of us may have friends from childhood which last through adulthood, while others might not. There is no 'right' or 'best' number of friends or relationships to have, nor is a long-term friendship necessarily closer or 'better than' than a more recent one. What matters is the quality of the relationship. To achieve strong and lasting bonds with others, we need to put some personal work in. When we do, it always pays off. Work doesn't have to be something we dislike or dread – it can be meaningful and enjoyable too!

... Describe the kind of work we need to do to build healthy relationships.

... Give examples of personal qualities which can help us with this.

Our relationship with our self

One of our most important relationships is with our self! During our teenage years, we begin to figure out who we are and start to build our self-image. Becoming more aware of how we view ourselves is a first step. We may discover that we are giving ourselves critical messages about our skin colour, body size, height, dress style and so on. Sometimes, even without being fully aware of it, our self-talk can become quite negative. All of us need to learn to 'hear' what our thoughts are telling us. For instance, a friend drifting away to join another group might lead us to believe that no one likes us.

Another example might be experiencing failure. This could trigger shaming self-talk such as '*How could I have done so badly! I'm just not as good as the others.*' As we're social beings, we frequently compare ourselves to others which means it's very easy to slip into this kind of self-criticism and negativity. A way to challenge this is to practise treating ourselves with respect. The best way to achieve this is to try to reduce negative thinking and replace it with more balanced self-talk. Here is an example: '*I didn't do as well as I thought I would – that hurts! I'm not where I want to be yet, but I can ask for some help and support. I want to learn from this experience.*'

... Come up with some examples of negative self-talk and then change it to statements that are more balanced.



Every relationship is unique

No one is taught how to make friends. We each approach this in our own way and usually through trial and error! For some, it comes naturally while others might need to work at it. Whatever our age, it can be hard to admit that we are looking for new friends. We can easily feel embarrassed if we think we have too few friends or if a friend moves on when we don't want them to. But this is life. We don't need to judge ourselves harshly if we find making friends a challenge or if a friend finds someone else they prefer to spend time with. There is no 'right' number of friends to have or right or wrong way to make friends. ... **Give examples of the qualities needed to approach someone new to find out if you might be able to start a friendship with them. Can you think of someone you really respect? What qualities do you most admire about them?**

It helps to know that everyone has phases in life when they feel lonely, or friendships aren't going as they'd wish – it's normal! We're all different – some of us, for example, find making friends relatively straightforward in childhood and then perhaps more difficult later in life, or vice versa.

Hellos and Goodbyes

We all need to get used to saying goodbye, as big and little endings happen throughout life. Friends and even family can come and go. No two relationships are alike; what might feel like a little goodbye for one person can be a significant loss for someone else. For instance, a young person could feel unexpectedly sad and even tearful at saying goodbye to a favourite teacher at the end of the school year as it might remind them of a family member who is no longer around. This could feel very emotional because of the memories stirred up. As this example reminds us, we all react in our own way to the different kinds of goodbyes which life presents. ... **Give examples of common big and little goodbyes including some unexpected ones.**

Some endings with friends or family members are very difficult, especially if they come as a surprise or are unwanted. We can learn how to manage the mixed emotions that can come up at such times. This may include feelings of sadness, anger, betrayal, and confusion. However, even the most painful goodbye brings opportunities for new relationships. If we talk through our feelings and build up our emotional strength, we can more easily move on to enjoy meeting new people and having new experiences.

**“Some people are going to leave but that's not the end of the story.
It's just the end of their part in your story!”**



New Faces, New People, New Worlds

Throughout life, we will meet people who are like us in some ways, or very different. Similarities and differences can be misleading. For instance, just because we've the same skin colour or have the same home culture as someone else doesn't necessarily mean we will have other things in common. Equally, someone who is visibly different from us could have had some similar life experiences and might become a good friend if we give ourselves the chance to get to know them. ... [Give examples of the kinds of experiences that draw people together even if, on the surface, they might seem very different from each other.](#)

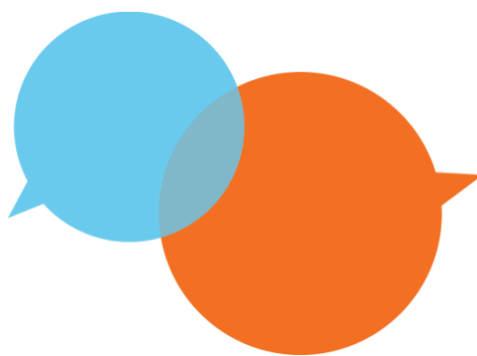
Being interested in and curious about people brings new insights. Even those people we feel closest to will see things in a different way from us and we can expand our understanding of life and relationships through sharing ideas, feelings, and points of view. Each new person we meet can open up a different perspective on the world around us. Even when some have ideas that might seem strange or unexpected, everyone we meet offers an opportunity to enlarge and expand our understanding and empathy, and each deserves to be respected. ... [Can you think of someone whose views and ideas have surprised you when you've gotten to know that person?](#)

Fitting in - peer pressure

Everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging even if they deny it or don't allow themselves to admit it. We are hardwired to have social relationships and benefit from having a community around us. However, many - if not all of us - have times when we think we don't fit in. This can be a very painful and upsetting experience. ... [What feelings come up for us when we find ourselves 'on the outside looking in'?](#)

To get away from the feelings stirred up by the experience of 'not belonging' or to avoid feeling anything painful in the first instance, we might give in to peer pressure and do things or act in a way that is not true to who we really are, or who we want to be. This is understandable but it doesn't have to be the end of the story. If we see where we are headed, we can always withdraw from a group or an individual and move on. ... [Give examples of peer pressure. What do we give up if we don't give in to it? What might we gain from walking away?](#)

All of us have the capacity to tell 'right' from 'wrong' – this knowledge is a kind of internal instinct, one which has ensured that human beings continue to get on together and has guaranteed the survival of our species. As we go through life, we continue to work out for ourselves which paths to take. We gain self-respect through trying to do the right thing even if it takes us a couple of attempts to get there!



Relationships at School

School is an important part of everyone's life and sets the scene for what comes next. Relationships between students and staff, like all relationships, work best if communication remains respectful even in difficult moments. At times, it can be hard to accept that adults have the right to make final decisions, give firm instructions or apply sanctions when rules are broken. All adults were young once and know what it feels like when teachers or parents/carers need to use their authority. It's not always easy but respecting that adults have the right to guide and direct young people is key to healthy relationships between older and younger generations. ... Describe how young people would like adults to treat them and vice versa.

Trying something new: Having friends at school can make all the difference. Research into human behaviour tells us that we don't usually make friends when we go out looking for them. Instead, friendships usually happen when we join an activity or a group that we care about for its own sake. Turning a new connection into a friendship might require some work. But we may find that others make time for us if we tap into an interest we share with them and make their lives (and ours!) better in some way. We all need friends to help us grow as well as to provide comfort and company. ... Describe how someone might feel going to a club or activity for the first time. What helps us to manage our newcomer's worries or awkwardness?

Considering how we spend our time: We also need to give attention to our relationship with our self and our future self! Good habits make a difference, now and in years to come. It helps to think carefully about how we spend our time. Some find it useful to create a picture of what their days look like to see how they are organising the hours before and after school as well as at weekends. We all need to schedule in the basics - eating, sleeping and self-care - as well as homework, exercise, and downtime. In later years, schoolwork is replaced by college or university course work and then by work itself. Committing to making the best use of our time now sets us up for the future. It is a form of self-care and a sign of self-respect. ... What can a clearly thought-out structure to our day bring us? What personal qualities do we need if we are to stick to our plans?

Managing change: Life never stands still and there will be rough patches along with the smooth. Examples of changing relationships are outgrowing a friendship, the ending of a romantic relationship, or of someone close to us leaving or even dying. Preparing for the end of secondary school or Sixth Form is another kind of change that everyone faces. Change stirs up mixed feelings including both hopes and concerns. None of us can predict what the future might bring. This uncertainty can easily spark fear or anxiety as well as curiosity and interest in new opportunities. The best way to manage it is to accept it and not let it overwhelm us. ... Give examples of achievable goals and the self-talk we can develop which will help us to reach them.



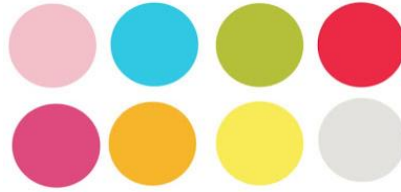
Our Relationship with Social Media

We all have a relationship with social media which is likely to be healthy at times and less so at others. Used thoughtfully, it enables us to stay in contact with friends and family and to keep up connections. However, any of us can go through phases when we use it addictively to escape from feelings or to avoid thinking about the past, present or future. ... Give examples of the kinds of feelings or thoughts we might want to distract ourselves from.

We could be tempted to join in online gossiping which can lead to a form of cyber bullying. Perhaps we've been on the receiving end of this. It is important for all of us to become more aware of the language we use as it is easy to misinterpret what someone writes or posts. Words can, and do, hurt. Equally, words can also repair relationships and support others. Language is an important social tool and using it respectfully makes all the difference. ... What drives us to gossip or make unkind remarks about others?

Building healthy relationships: Everyone wants to be liked or loved and feel wanted and admired. This means that any of us can be vulnerable to being groomed by someone, especially online. We need to be aware of this and build our relationships carefully whether in real life or on social media. Healthy relationships are ones where real feelings, including difficult ones, can be shared. If we're being groomed, it can all seem too good to be true - this is often a warning sign! Feeling safe and being safe are basic human rights. If we think we're getting drawn into an unhealthy relationship or being taken advantage of in some way, we need to talk to someone who understands and can help. ... Describe situations that could make us feel unsafe. Now give examples of the opposite.

Bullying and bullied: Bullying takes all kinds of forms. It can be obvious or something that is difficult to spot at first. For instance, we may be 'bullied' into doing something or saying something we know isn't respectful or right. Or we could bully a more compliant or passive friend or sibling in this way. Sometimes racist or discriminatory behaviour is a form of bullying. Any of us can be a bully or be bullied. This happens online, in person, in groups or one-to-one relationships. It's not helpful to judge so-called bullies. Those who bully do so for a reason: they are hurting inside and want someone else to feel their pain. They too need support so they can understand themselves better and recognise how their words and behaviour hurt others. ... Give examples of less obvious bullying. If you witness bullying, what can you do or say in the moment?



The Ups & Downs of Relationships

Repairing relationship ruptures: No one gets through life without making errors of judgement or hurting others, often unintentionally. Relationships can get complicated and confusing. For instance, perhaps we've misunderstood someone's words or something they've done. Or maybe we're the ones who are being seen as somehow 'in the wrong'. Strong feelings can be stirred up on both sides. Relationships go through ups and downs like this. We need to be prepared for this and learn how to repair relationships when breakdowns occur so that we can recover from misunderstandings and hurt feelings. Talking it through usually helps clear things up. ... [Describe the feelings we may have if we are upset with or betrayed by someone we are close to.](#)

Learning to self-soothe: We all need to have a place we can go to which calms, soothes, and relaxes us. This can be a real space such as out in nature or a room at home or elsewhere. Equally, we need a place in our thoughts to which we can retreat when needed. A memory of somewhere beautiful or of a nice time with family or a friend are good examples. Stress and anxiety are a fact of life and having a comforting place in mind helps us manage. ... [Can you remember someone who comforted or soothed you? If so, try to use similar words to calm yourself or come up with your own soothing self-talk.](#)

Stress and anxiety are both linked to fear, usually of what might happen. For instance, relationships in or out of home, with friends or with our self can be a source of distress as can schoolwork or, later in life, work stress. Taking three deep breaths and using self-soothing self-talk can help. We can then check out our fear-based self-talk. ... [What is causing you stress? Is there any action you can take to make it better? If not, what can you say to yourself to create a calmer, more contained state of mind?](#)

Our self-talk influences how we experience life. Any of us can either wind ourselves up or panic ourselves. This usually happens when we are preoccupied with 'what ifs' (e.g. What if I fail? What if they reject me? etc) We can stop this kind of self-destructive thinking by replacing fear-based self-talk with more balanced thoughts. This can help make our fears 'right-sized', not too big or too small. We can't live a totally fear-free life, but we can learn to manage better with some support. ...[Give examples of the different kinds of fear we can all experience. Now come up with balanced self-talk which can contain and manage fear.](#)

Managing our relationship with our self: Aiming for balanced self-talk means that we don't simply fill our minds with positive goals and affirmations. Too much positivity can result in denying other feelings that are equally real and need to be understood including what makes us fearful, angry, jealous, lonely, left out and so on. Excessive positivity can also lead to perfectionism. A mindset of this kind means we'll always feel we're letting ourselves down by never being perfect. This is not a helpful way to manage our relationship with our self. None of us can be perfect. Instead, we can aim to motivate, challenge, and support ourselves by setting realistic goals and taking responsibility for meeting them as best we can, asking for support when needed. This can lead to greater self-understanding and the ability to forgive ourselves, so that we 'can pick ourselves up' and try again. ... [Give examples of achievable goals and the kind of self-talk we can develop which will help us to reach them.](#)



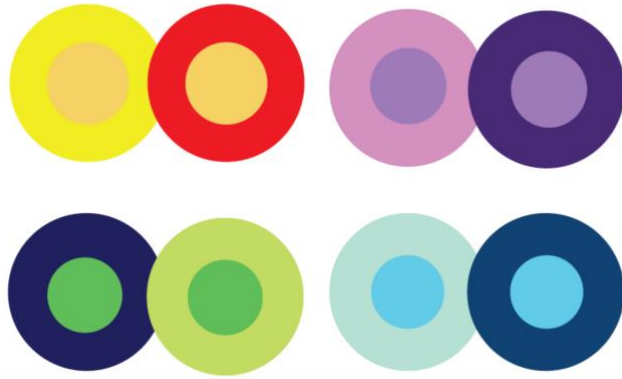
Our Relationship with Our Self

Body image: Our relationship with our self includes how we relate to our physical self. It can be easy to slip into judging our body and seeing only negatives. Certain aspects of our physicality such as skin colour and tone, eye colour, height, bone structure and so on cannot be changed. It is important, too, not to put too much emphasis on appearance or to make judgments about people based on what they look like. Very few of us will feel as attractive as we might like to be, and in teenage years, most will feel anxious or sensitive about bodily changes over which we have no control. While celebrities are carefully photographed to look beautiful, most of us don't measure up to these unrealistic standards! Instead, we can practise valuing our body, not least because it literally sustains life. We learn to appreciate this, which in turn leads to treating our body with care and respect. This includes being mindful of what, and how much, we eat as well as getting enough exercise and sleep. Respecting our body naturally leads to acceptance and to making the best of how we look. ... Give examples of balanced self-talk which can help us improve our relationship with our body.

Gender identity and sexuality: Our society used to recognise only two genders: male and female however this is changing. Many of us do not fit neatly into the categories of 'boy-man/male' or 'girl-woman/ female'. For example, some have an identity that blends elements of both male and female, or one that cannot be categorized in terms of either gender. Although it is still the case that parts of society tends to label 'heterosexual' as the 'norm' or 'preferred' sexual orientation, this too is changing. We now know that ways of experiencing the self are complicated and can change over time. Working out who we are isn't something that has to be decided right now. We can let it unfold and remember that identity is never fixed – it evolves and shifts as we learn more about ourselves. ...Give examples of some of the feelings and questions that could come up when we think about our identity.

Thinking about difference: Perhaps we've always felt different, as if we are on the outside looking in at everyone else enjoying what we can't be a part of. Or maybe we only feel this way some of the time, depending on where we are or who we are with. Even those who seem to 'have it all' will have experiences of outsider-ness. Our most visible feature is our skin colour which can be a source of pride or shame and cause us to feel like insiders or outsiders. Skin colour and tone should never be labelled either 'better than' or 'less than'.

Everyone has invisible differences too as well as feelings of not being 'good enough' in some way. We might imagine that if others saw 'our real self', they wouldn't like us. Or perhaps we feel our family's background is 'lacking' in some way. These examples are common to most of us. Everything comes back to what our thoughts are telling us about our self and who we are. If we are judging ourselves as 'not good enough' in some way, we need to challenge this and change our inner voice so it is more supportive and less critical. ... Describe some visible and invisible differences and how they make us feel.



Taking Responsibility for Our Relationships

As we move through the years, we need to get used to taking charge of our life. This involves everyday choices such as how we manage our relationships with others and our self-talk as well as how we use our time. We also build the skills to learn from the past, make informed decisions in the present and plan for the future.

Making choices and taking charge means we are willing to take full responsibility for ourselves and our lives. This can sound a little daunting at first, but we learn to do so by taking small steps at first and discussing our big decisions with those who can help us think things through. ... Give examples of some of the feelings that can come up when we are faced with making choices and taking charge. What can help?

Cultivating self-respect and personal dignity: As we build more positive relationships with our self and those around us, our self-esteem and respect for others improves. We develop qualities that we can be proud of and that others admire and respect. This involves clear thinking, managing our self-talk and being committed to our self-development. Although developing life skills is a form of work which carries on throughout life, it brings its own rewards. Self-respect and personal dignity are two of the most valuable qualities we can cultivate... What personal qualities and achievements are you most proud of?

The future isn't something far off in the distance. It is built over time by our present-day actions, our self-talk and our ways of seeing ourselves and the world around us. If, for example, we have a particular goal in mind, we plan what we need to do to achieve it and start taking steps towards it now, not waiting for it to 'simply happen'. This applies to our relationships too. For instance, if we hope to have respectful, lasting friendships and relationships, or be in a loving partnership or marriage, we need to learn how to appreciate and develop our own best qualities now. We'll also want to think about the qualities that are part of all healthy relationships and develop them. This includes understanding what it takes to develop trust, good communication, empathy, honesty, respect, 'give and take', and compassion. Our future isn't waiting for us – it all starts here, in the present. We invite you to take up the challenge of creating the life you most want to live!

... What kind of person do you want to become? How does this link to your life values?

... What do you want for your future? How will you get there, starting now?