

## Relationships and Dating During College

Relationships rate high on the list of important priorities for college students. Roommates, friendships, family and dating relationships all play key roles in creating what will become the memories of our college days gone by. Perhaps no relationship other than that with our "self" matters more during our college years than the relationship with our love interest.

For the traditional single student, developing a dating relationship with another student brings excitement, novelty, companionship, attention and the fulfillment of physical and emotional pleasure and love. Additionally, although often not apparent until the relationship has progressed beyond the romantic phase, dating relationships frequently create a significant amount of stress and frustration, too. Learning a few of the essentials for relating well in dating relationships can go a long way to help you enjoy the benefits of positive dating relationships.

### Guidelines for Relating Well

#### **Be Honest with Yourself and Your Boyfriend/Girlfriend**

In dating relationships and life in general, honesty is the best policy. Not that you need to tell 'everything' on the first date or even within the first few weeks or months of a relationship, but it is important initially that you reveal your true values to your boyfriend/girlfriend rather than presenting as someone you would like to be.

#### **Master the Rules for Effective Communication in Relationships**

According to over 38 years of scientific research on relationships, Drs. John and Julie Gottman report that the following behaviors often spell disaster in relationships and lead to couples feeling more distant rather than emotionally close:

##### Criticism:

Criticism occurs when you criticize a loved one's character. Criticisms are often global statements that send a message to your loved one that he or she is somehow irreparably flawed or hopeless.

Statements like: "You're always so irresponsible," or "I can't believe what a slob you are, you never look decent" are examples of criticism. It is possible to avoid being critical and still get your point across that you want your loved one to behave differently.

Instead of criticizing, try a more gentle approach by stating your complaint specifically; describe how you feel or what you experience, and then talk about what you need by describing it objectively without personality/character judgments:

"I get upset and hurt when you say you'll call me by 6:00 but often don't call until 7:30; I want/need you call when you say you will..." or "I've asked you several times to wear something nice when we go out to dinner with my parents; it's important to me that you at least wear nice jeans and a pressed shirt when we are with my parents."

Also, avoid words like "always" and "never" when describing your loved one's behaviors.

## Contempt

Contempt is taking a position of moral superiority and disrespect. Examples of contempt include:

"You know, you're an idiot. I don't understand how you could be so dumb."

"Oh please...could you be any more pathetic?"

Another form of being contemptuous is laughing at or mocking someone who is trying to be serious or reasonable. Contempt can even be a gesture or facial expression, such as rolling your eyes while someone is sharing their thoughts and feelings with you.

Instead of being contemptuous, build a "climate of praise and appreciation" for your loved one. This takes work and patience, but once you have experienced a relationship built on mutual appreciation and respect, you will not want the alternative.

## Defensiveness

Defensiveness occurs when we automatically assume we are blameless when communication problems occur. If you immediately become defensive at the suggestion that you played a role in part of the communication problem, this can create difficulty in developing emotional intimacy and trust. Owning part of the problem and searching for middle ground and compromise are the ways to a more satisfying relationship.

## Stonewalling

Stonewalling entails shutting down emotionally/mentally and tuning out. Usually people who are stonewalling are feeling emotionally flooded/overwhelmed and are unable to process their thoughts and emotions during a disagreement with their loved one. The way to overcome or avoid stonewalling is to learn to keep yourself calm and "self-soothed" during intense conversations. Self-soothing and calming includes slow, deep relaxed breathing, muscle relaxation, and rehearsing calming/quieting thoughts. Stonewallers are not dismissed from a conflict, they are just pausing briefly in order to calm themselves down before resuming communication and looking for a more effective solution/compromise.

## **Other Helpful Tips**

### **Avoid Drinking or Using Drugs**

Alcohol and drugs only complicate relationships. Find healthier ways to cope, such as exercise, journaling or talking with a counselor about what is troubling you. If you drink socially, set a reasonable limit and stick to it.

### **Keep Your Friendships Intact**

It is common for students involved in dating to focus most of their attention on their romantic interest while allowing friendships to fade to the background. Doing so will leave you vulnerable to not having

the support you need should the relationship end or should there be a time when your girlfriend/boyfriend is out of town or unavailable for an extended period of time. Remember, too, that your single or non-dating friends want and need your continued support and friendship whether or not you are separately involved in a romantic relationship. Allow for time apart from your loved one, and enjoy the friendships you've always had. Spending time apart is needed in any relationship, and often the time apart makes the time together even more rewarding.

### **Talk to a Trusted Peer, Family Member or Counselor during Stressful and Challenging Times**

Friends, family members and counselors can help you share the burden of uncomfortable emotions during a difficult phase of your relationship. Everyone needs a well-maintained safety net throughout the lifespan!

### **Stay Well!**

Keeping yourself physically and emotionally well is an important priority, especially while you are involved in a dating relationship. Being at your best will enhance just about anything you do in life, including your dating experiences. A state of general wellness makes us more resilient and happier, even in times of significant difficulty. Eat well-balanced meals, get plenty of fresh air and exercise, practice relaxation, get 7-9 hours of sleep each night, and find meaningful activities to be involved in, stay socially active, and laugh often!

### [Get Help for Your Relationship at Northwest](#)

If you or your partner is a Northwest student and you are struggling or would like to fine-tune or strengthen your relationship, schedule an intake appointment by calling the Counseling Center at (660) 562-1348.