ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Romance, Relationships and University

Romantic and sexual relationships can be a wonderful part of being a student. This is a time of possibility and transition but it’s not always easy.

Navigating your academic and personal journey alongside intimate relating can be hard at times. Existing relationships can be upset and those relationships that you establish whilst here at university will have to evolve and change if they are to stand the test of time.

There are lots of different stories and experiences around about romantic relationships:

- You may have come to university as part of a couple, fearing the impact this might have on this relationship.
- You may have used coming to university as an opportunity to get out of an unsatisfactory relationship that you were not sure how to end.
- You may come to university with the expectation that it is where you will meet ‘the one’
- You might want to date as many people as possible whilst you are here and not get tied down.
- You may have little or no relationship experience and be worried that your peers are leaving you behind or be confused by sexual expectations.
- You may feel that you should conform to a particular idea of how to be in a relationship because of your background but that is hard to live up to now that you are here.

Common relationship difficulties at university

1. Merged/co-dependent relationships in which the partners in a couple can lose touch with themselves as individuals. In a relationship like this, you may find it hard to find your way out of the bubble of the honeymoon period. You and your partner may isolate yourself in your couple and get caught up in supporting or being supported by one another to the exclusion of other friends, activities and studies.

2. The end of the honeymoon – many couples find it hard to make the transition from the full-blown romantic merger to a good relationship. You may feel at a loss as to how to negotiate this tricky stage and be tempted to end the relationship abruptly or emotionally withdraw from it leaving it to die a slow death.

3. The pressure to conform to common romantic and relationship stereotypes can be significant. As a male student you may feel pressured to take the lead romantically and sexually and that you should ‘play the field’, as a female student you may be left walking a tightrope between feeling they you need to be constantly sexually alluring and at the same time monogamous and nurturing.

4. The anxious-avoidant trap - this is a common but challenging coupling. If you are an ‘anxious’ partner you are often preoccupied with relationships and concerned about your partner’s ability to love you back. If you are an ‘avoidant’ partner you are likely to believe that intimacy will threaten your independence. Anxious and avoidant partners fit in the sense that each reaffirm the other’s beliefs about themselves. As an avoidant your self-perception of yourself as strong and independent is confirmed, as is the belief that others want to pull you into more closeness.
than you are comfortable with. While as an anxious partner your expectation of wanting more intimacy than a partner can provide is confirmed, so is your anticipation of ultimately being let down by significant others.

Building Relationship skills

1. Successful relationships seem to find a balance between the need to be close and the equally important need to be separate. While people's need for independence and self-determination are generally recognised in western society, dependency is sometimes used as a dirty word.

In fact, we’re all hardwired to be dependent on a significant other.

Dependency always exists in a relationship, uncomfortable feelings of vulnerability and fear of loss are always part of the package; accepting rather than denying this opens up opportunities for a relationship and the individuals within it to grow. ‘The dependency paradox’ suggests that the more effectively dependent you are on a partner the more independent you will become!

2. Good communication is at the heart of good relationships and becomes particularly important once the honeymoon period is over and previously ignored differences begin to create tension.

When addressing things, you find difficult with your partner it is important to complain rather than criticise i.e. ‘I was frustrated that you didn’t call when you said you would’, rather than ‘you are so rubbish for not calling me’.

Always start from ‘I’ + a feeling/emotion, this is one of the ways of communicating that invite a discussion rather than a defensive response and a row.

Other tips are:

- be specific, stick to the issue at hand, rather than bringing up previous grievances;
- avoid absolutes e.g. ‘you never...’;
- try not to interrupt or launch into a monologue;
- recognise that you may not be able to solve everything in one shot, but check out if your partner is really engaging or just evading or trying to make you feel foolish;
- don’t forget to breathe.

There are two tried and tested communication tools for couples available from Counselling:

- The Daily Temperature Reading and,
- Facts, Feelings and Fair Requests

3. The ‘correct’ way to do relationships is not prescribed by your gender, sexual orientation or student status.

University is a place where you may find yourself exploring relationships but this exploration can be stifled if you are weighed down by stereotypes.

University is also very much not the last chance saloon for relationships, you don’t have to make sure you tick everything off your list while you’re here! Learning and developing relationships is a lifelong experience.
4. Anxious partners are often on the look-out for signs that their partner is not committed enough. If you are anxious you begin to associate the anxious/obsessive feelings evoked with passion and therefore tend to feel there is something missing from reliable and supportive relationships.

The challenge for you is to decouple this association and believe that it is ok to be dependent and to express your needs in an assertive and direct way.

Avoidant partners are always manoeuvring to keep people at a distance. If you are avoidant, you are quick to look for escape routes and to think negatively of your partner.

Beneath the surface you are often longing for a phantom ex or dreaming of ‘the one’, as a way of protecting yourself from the intimacy you fear. Your challenge is to become more aware of and question your distancing strategies.

Also to support your partner more, ‘the dependency paradox’ suggests that the more you do this the more independent you’ll feel and the less needy your partner will be.

**Taking care of yourself after a break up**

The end of a relationship can evoke real feelings of loss. In these cases, it is important to recognise that you are dealing with grief, so allow yourself time to heal and be kind to yourself – find people you can talk to, friends or a counsellor; eat well; sleep enough; and reduce external pressures as much as possible.

There is a process that you need to go through that cannot be avoided, but is natural and normal.

Once you have the headspace you might want to spend some time trying to understand the relationship and what can be learned from it. There is a balance to be found here between spending too much time analysing it, which may leave you feeling low and stuck, and spending so little that you rush into something else and make familiar mistakes.

**Further help and support**

The University counselling service - Tel. 0118 378 4216 or e-mail counselling@reading.ac.uk


**Useful publications**

Relationships for Dummies – K. Wachs
Attached – A. Levine and R. Heller
I love you but I’m not in love with you – A. Marshall
The New Male Sexuality – B. Zilbergeld

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