



FOUNDATIONS OF A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP



Building healthy behaviours in the early stages of dating and new relationships

Please note: This tip sheet includes sensitive content related to relationship safety and emotional well-being. If you are feeling distressed or uncertain, support is available to you 24/7 through the **Family Information Line (FIL)**, a free, confidential, and bilingual service:

North America: 1-800-866-4546

International: 00-800-771-17722

Email: FIL-LIF@cfmws.com

What is a Healthy Relationship?

Healthy relationships are built over time through trust, communication, emotional safety, and mutual respect. In a healthy relationship, you can be yourself without fear of being judged, pressured, or controlled. You feel safe to speak up, express your emotions, and make decisions without losing your sense of identity.

Ask yourself: Can you speak honestly with your partner? Do you feel safe expressing your emotions or concerns? Do both of you take responsibility when things go wrong? These are important signs that your relationship is respectful and balanced.

In military families and communities, healthy relationships can be especially important. Frequent relocations, training schedules, and deployments can increase stress, disrupt routines, and create emotional distance. Strong relationships help you stay connected and supported through these changes.

Healthy Behaviours in New Relationships

New relationships can be exciting, but they also require awareness. If you are starting something new, watch for behaviours that encourage emotional safety and equality. These include:

- Listening with empathy and patience
- Respecting boundaries without guilt or pressure
- Communicating clearly and with care
- Encouraging independence, including time with friends or family
- Owning mistakes and working to repair them

These behaviours show care and help build trust. They also model what a healthy dynamic should feel like, especially in the early stages.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Relationships

All relationships involve a mix of emotions. Joy, sadness, frustration, and hope are normal and valid. But how you express these emotions makes a big difference. In a relationship, emotions are shared with care, not through yelling, blaming, or threats.

Before starting a difficult conversation, take a moment to process how you feel. Reflecting first can help you respond with calm and clarity instead of reacting impulsively.

Ask yourself: Do you feel nervous about speaking up? Do disagreements turn into silence or anger? These may be signs of an unhealthy dynamic. Avoiding difficult conversations, being called names, or feeling guilty for expressing your needs can wear down your confidence over time.

A healthy relationship allows for disagreement without fear. If you feel like you are constantly choosing your words carefully to avoid upsetting your partner, that may be a sign something is not right.

Warning Signs in the Early Stages

Sometimes it is easy to miss warning signs, especially early in a relationship when everything feels intense or flattering. Here are behaviors to look out for in your relationship:

Love-bombing: overwhelming gifts or compliments early on

Gaslighting: making someone doubt their memory or feelings

Controlling behaviour: trying to gain power through intimidation, or isolation such as monitoring your messages, limiting contact with friends

Coercion: pressuring someone to do things they are not ready for

Emotional abuse: repeated criticism, guilt-tripping, or subtle manipulation

If something feels uncomfortable or confusing, it is okay to pause and reflect. Trust your instincts and give yourself permission to take a step back without guilt or pressure.

Emotional Awareness and Regulation

Relationships are impacted by how you and your partner understand and manage emotions. Emotional awareness means being able to name your feelings. Emotional regulation means choosing how to respond when those feelings arise.

Military life can challenge your emotional balance. Separation, uncertainty, or relocations may trigger anxiety or stress. *Ask yourself:* Can you stay calm when emotions run high? Can you talk about how you feel without blaming your partner? Are you open to hearing their perspective too? These are signs of emotional intelligence, and they help strengthen your connection.

Boundaries and Self-Respect

Boundaries protect your well-being while also allowing for closeness. They help you feel safe in your body, time, and space. When setting your own boundaries, examples include:

- Asking for personal time without guilt
- Moving slowly in physical or emotional closeness
- Saying no without fear of consequences
- Making choices based on values, not pressure

When your boundaries are met with respect, it shows the relationship is rooted in care, not control.

Intersectionality and Inclusive Relationships

Your identity shapes how you experience love, safety, and support. If you are Black, Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, disabled, or navigating more than one identity, you may face unique challenges in your relationships. These overlapping parts of who you are can influence how you're treated and how comfortable you feel setting boundaries or asking for support.

Here are a few examples of how this can show up:

- Being misgendered during conflict with your partner
- Cultural pressure to stay in a harmful relationship
- Racist stereotypes dismissing your emotional needs
- Disability-related boundaries seen as "too much"
- Lack of identity-specific services and resources makes it harder for you to leave

Ask yourself: Have you felt judged for setting boundaries? Have you worried you would not be believed because of your background or identity? A healthy relationship values all parts of who you are and respects your full lived experience.

Resources and Support

Healthy relationships require ongoing learning, practice, and support. The Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (CFMWS) website offers courses, videos, and tools to help you strengthen communication and navigate challenges as your relationship grows and evolves:

- Managing Angry Moments (for Canadian Armed Forces members)
- Inter-Comm communication program
- Tips for handling conflict in relationships
- Guidance on preparing for long absences or transitions
- Road to Mental Readiness (R2MR) for families

If you're in immediate danger or fear for your safety or that of others around you, please contact local authorities. For support in your area, you can look for crisis lines and local services via the Family Information Line, your local Military Family Resource Center (MFRC), or Military Family Services (MFS) service provider.

Created in partnership with Ruth-Mirca Thomas. Ruth-Mirca Thomas, MSW, RSW is a registered social worker and founder of *Divine Harmony Counselling and Consulting Services*. She specializes in trauma-informed, intersectional care for individuals and couples navigating life transitions, healthy relationships, and emotional wellness in military and marginalized communities.

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