

What Does Healthy Love Look Like? Six Signs of a Healthy Relationship

Rian Gordon

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October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month—a time to support survivors, increase awareness of abuse, and talk about what we can do to prevent it. One important part of prevention is helping people **recognize what healthy love looks like**.

Relationships are complicated, and no two relationships look exactly alike. [Healthy couples disagree](#). They get frustrated. They hurt each other's feelings and make mistakes. A healthy relationship isn't one without conflict; it's one where both people are safe, respected, and free to be themselves—even when they disagree.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), promoting healthy, respectful relationships and teaching relationship skills are important parts of preventing intimate partner violence.

Domestic violence can include more than physical violence. It can also involve sexual violence, stalking, psychological aggression, threats, intimidation, isolation, financial control, or other behaviors used to exert power and control over a partner. The [National Domestic](#)

[Violence Hotline](#) describes relationships as existing on a spectrum from healthy to unhealthy to abusive.

So, what does the healthy end of that spectrum look like? Here are six essentials for a healthy romantic relationship.

Shared Responsibility and Equality

Healthy relationships are *partnerships*. When a relationship is healthy, both people take responsibility for their own choices, emotions, and behavior, and both contribute to the health of the relationship. Problems that affect the couple can be approached with a sense of “we,” not because one person is responsible for the other person's actions, but because healthy partners work together to solve shared problems.

For example, “*You have a money problem*” may lead quickly to blame and defensiveness. “*I'm worried about our spending. Can we look at our budget together?*” approaches a shared concern as a team.

At the same time, **shared responsibility does not mean shared responsibility for abuse**. Each person is responsible for how they choose to treat their partner. Anger, stress, conflict, alcohol, financial problems, or something a partner said or did do not excuse threats, intimidation, coercion, or violence. Abuse involves a pattern in which one person seeks [power and control](#) over another.

Equality is therefore an important part of a healthy relationship. Both partners should have a voice in major decisions, access to resources, freedom to maintain relationships with family and friends, and the ability to express needs or disagreements without fear.

Healthy love sounds less like “*You need to do what I say*” and more like “*How can we work through this together?*”

Trust and Safety

Trust is one of the foundations of a strong relationship. Relationship researcher John Gottman has written extensively about the importance of [trust in intimate relationships](#). Trust grows through many small moments in which partners show that they are [dependable, honest, caring, and responsive to one another](#).

Consider questions like:

- Can I trust my partner to be there for me when I need them?

- Can I be vulnerable without worrying that it will later be used against me?
- Can I share a different opinion without being punished, threatened, or humiliated?
- Can I spend time with friends or family without fear of my partner's reaction?
- Do we respect one another's privacy?
- Do I feel emotionally and physically safe in this relationship?

Trust does **not** require giving up your independence or privacy to prove your love. Constantly checking a partner's phone, demanding passwords, tracking their location, making accusations, or restricting who they can spend time with are not signs of greater commitment.

In a healthy relationship, trust creates freedom and safety, not control.

Intimacy, Boundaries, and Consent

Intimacy simply means closeness, and romantic relationships can include both [emotional and physical intimacy](#).

Emotional intimacy develops when we allow ourselves to be known and respond to our partner's vulnerability with empathy and care. Physical affection can also help couples feel close and connected. Research has found connections among couple communication, emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and relationship satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2014).

But healthy intimacy—even in committed relationships—**always includes boundaries and consent**.

Marriage, commitment, or previous sexual activity never entitles someone to physical or sexual access to their partner. According to the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#), consent is ongoing. Partners should be able to communicate what they are and are not comfortable with, and either person can change their mind at any time.

Healthy physical intimacy is never based on pressure, guilt, fear, manipulation, or obligation. And boundaries extend beyond physical intimacy. Healthy partners can have boundaries around privacy, personal space, friendships, family relationships, finances, technology, and other parts of life.

Closeness is meaningful when it is freely chosen by both people.

Respectful Communication

Communication is vital in any relationship, but simply communicating isn't enough. *How* we communicate matters. Healthy communication allows both people to express needs, wants, frustrations, values, and goals while still treating each other with dignity. We can disagree without demeaning each other.

One helpful principle is to be soft on the person while remaining firm on the issue.

That might sound like:

"I'm frustrated about what happened, and I want to talk about it."

Rather than:

"You always ruin everything."

Healthy communication also means listening, trying to understand your partner's perspective, and making room for differences.

But there is an important distinction between ordinary conflict and abuse. Threats, intimidation, destroying property, blocking someone from leaving, degrading or humiliating them, deliberately frightening them, or using the silent treatment as a means of control are not simply "poor communication skills." Likewise, **someone who is being abused is not responsible for finding a better way to communicate so that their partner will stop abusing them.**

In a healthy relationship, both people can speak—and both people are safe to disagree.

Commitment With Care

Commitment is an important part of many lasting relationships. It means continuing to invest in the relationship, especially when life is difficult or partners disagree. Commitment can look like prioritizing your relationship, keeping promises, repairing after conflict, making sacrifices for one another, and choosing to treat your partner with love and respect even when you are frustrated.

During conflict, commitment might mean replacing:

"I hate you. You're ruining my life."

With:

"I'm frustrated because we aren't on the same page. I want to understand your perspective, and I'd like you to hear mine too."

But commitment should never be confused with an obligation to endure abuse. **Staying at all costs is not the definition of a healthy relationship.** A healthy commitment leaves room for both partners' safety, dignity, autonomy, and boundaries. Love should never require someone to tolerate violence, coercion, threats, stalking, intimidation, or control in order to prove their loyalty.

Healthy commitment says, *"This relationship matters to me, and so does your well-being."*

Time and Attention

There's a saying that "good things take time," and that certainly applies to relationships.

Strong relationships usually aren't built through a handful of grand romantic gestures. They're built through small, ordinary moments repeated over time. Greeting each other after work. Putting down the phone and listening. Showing appreciation. Laughing together. Asking about something important to your partner. Making time for a date. Offering affection. Checking in after a difficult day. Over time, those small choices communicate an important message: You matter to me.

Healthy couples also recognize that [loving someone does not mean spending every moment together](#). Both partners should be able to maintain friendships, interests, family relationships, work, and appropriate independence outside the relationship.

Time together should strengthen connection—not become a way of monitoring, isolating, or controlling one another.

Healthy Love Makes Room for Two Whole People

There is no such thing as a perfect relationship. Healthy couples still misunderstand each other. They disagree. They sometimes communicate poorly. They have stressful seasons. They apologize, learn, repair, and keep growing.

The difference between relationships that are healthy, and those that are unhealthy or abusive is that underneath the imperfections is a foundation of **safety, respect, equality, trust, consent, and freedom.**

Knowing what healthy relationships look like matters. This Domestic Violence Awareness Month, we can do more than talk about the warning signs of unhealthy relationships. We can also help ourselves, our children, our friends, and our communities recognize the green flags:

- Respect.
- Equality.
- Trust.
- Boundaries.
- Consent.
- Kindness.
- Freedom.
- Safety.

These aren't extras in a healthy relationship. They're essential parts of what healthy love looks like.

If Something Doesn't Feel Safe

If you're reading this and recognizing that your relationship doesn't feel safe, remember that relationship education is not a substitute for specialized domestic violence support. Abuse can include physical or sexual violence, but it can also include threats, intimidation, isolation, stalking, financial control, coercion, and other patterns of power and control.

You can learn more about the difference between healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships through the [National Domestic Violence Hotline's Relationship Spectrum](#).

For confidential support, safety-planning information, and resources, contact the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) at **1-800-799-SAFE (7233)** or text **START** to **88788**. If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services. *This blog post is based on an original article written by Aubrey-Dawn Palmer for The Healthy Humans Project, and was used with permission.*