Lesson 1: Understanding Healthy Relationships

Introduction

In this lesson students examine the characteristics and benefits of healthy relationships and the characteristics of unhealthy relationships. Students also learn about the importance of effective communication to the development and maintenance of a healthy relationship. They examine elements and styles of communication, including the potential impact of technology on effective communication.

Specific Learning Outcomes

12.HR.1 Demonstrate understanding of the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships, and discuss factors that might influence their development.

12.HR.2 Demonstrate understanding of effective communication within a relationship and the potential impact of technology on communication within a relationship.

Key Understandings

- Relationships are based on some commonly accepted values (e.g., respect, honesty, equity, consideration, commitment).
- Healthy relationships result in mental-emotional, social, and physical benefits.
- Controllable and uncontrollable factors affect the dynamics of relationships.
- A healthy relationship is a shared responsibility and requires effective communication.
- The mode and style of communication may affect how a message is understood.

Essential Questions

1. What are some common characteristics of a healthy relationship and characteristics of an unhealthy relationship?
2. What are the benefits of a healthy relationship?
3. What controllable and uncontrollable factors affect relationships?
4. What are the components of effective communication in a healthy relationship?
5. What are the implications of different communication media?

Background Information

Characteristics of a Healthy Relationship

Healthy relationships are enjoyable and respectful and provide opportunities for many positive experiences that affect self-esteem. We can develop healthy relationships with anyone, including family, friends, and dating partners. It takes time, energy, and care to develop positive, healthy relationships. Relationships made during the teenage years can become very special and may form an important part of life. There are also many lessons to be learned from the relationships we have.

Healthy dating relationships should start with the same ingredients that healthy friendships have, such as effective communication, honesty, and respect. Dating relationships are a little different than other relationships, however, because they may include expressions of physical affection that may range from hugging, kissing, or holding hands to sexual intercourse.

> **NOTE TO TEACHER**
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> **Cultural Variations in Dating**
> Learners in the classroom may reflect a variety of different practices and beliefs regarding dating. Furthermore, in some cultures, intermediaries play a role in "matching" potential partners. Some students may be hesitant to share their experiences if they do not conform to the perceived "norms."

All healthy relationships between two partners are characterized by communication, respect, sharing, and trust. They are based on the belief that both partners are equal and that decision making in the relationship is shared equally.

In healthy relationships, we must maintain the freedom to be ourselves. It is important to maintain an individual identity, regardless of the type of relationship being pursued.

Maintaining our identity in a romantic relationship also means nurturing the other relationships we already have with family and friends. At first, dating couples may want to spend all their time with each other, but it is equally important for couples to spend time apart so that they can maintain healthy relationships with other people. These relationships provide perspective, and can be a valuable source of support when a couple experiences difficult or stressful times in a romantic relationship or when the relationship ends.

A healthy relationship should be satisfying and promote individual growth. Establishing mutually acceptable boundaries based on personal values is important in any relationship. Romantic partners should never pressure each other to do things they have agreed not to do. Mutual respect means not only giving respect to a partner, but also showing respect for oneself.

> **NOTE TO TEACHER**
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> As discussions about the characteristics of a healthy relationship take place, the term *intimate* may come up. Develop a class definition of the term so that students have a common understanding of its meaning.

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Some important characteristics of a healthy relationship are identified below.

Closeness
- You are caring and loyal.
- You trust your partner.
- You share your feelings.
- You support your partner during illness or during stressful times.

Shared Goals and Beliefs
- You share beliefs and values.
- You recognize and respect differences in each other.

Shared Experiences
- You share common interests and friends/acquaintances.
- You talk about your experiences and accept and respect each other's individual interests.

Communication
- You are honest with each other.
- You listen to each other.

Respect
- You use respectful language and do not act in ways that demean your partner.
- You understand your partner's wishes and feelings.
- You are ready to compromise—to meet your partner halfway.

Humour
- You and your partner enjoy being with each other and can laugh together.

Affection
- You show your partner you care.
- You show each other affection in many ways.

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* Source: Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba, 2006. Adapted with permission.

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For additional information about healthy relationships, refer to the following websites:

MyLaurier Student Portal. "Healthy Relationships." *Student Health and Development.* 2007. <www.mylaurier.ca/development/info/Relationships.htm>.

Palo Alto Medical Foundation. "ABCs of a Healthy Relationship." *Teen Health Info.* Jan. 2008. <www.pamf.org/teen/abc/>.

Thompson Rivers University (TRU). "Healthy Relationships." *TRU Wellness Centre.* 2009. <www.tru.ca/wellness/physical/sexualhealth/healthy.html>.

For website updates, please visit Websites to Support the Grades 11 and 12 Curriculum at <www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/physhlth/>.

Characteristics of an Unhealthy Relationship

Relationships generally start out with good intentions. As relationships develop, disagreements and conflicts will arise. Conflict is not necessarily negative if we deal with it appropriately. How we deal with conflict is based on a given situation, as well as on previously learned behaviours.

In some conflict situations, people may use behaviours that are considered unhealthy or abusive, and may include the following:

- **Emotional:** making degrading comments, ignoring, isolating, controlling friendships and/or activities, threatening
- **Physical:** slapping, pushing, punching
- **Sexual:** unwanted touching, forced or coerced sex
- **Financial:** taking or withholding money, controlling spending

These abusive behaviours will be examined more closely in Module E, Lesson 3.

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Suggestion for Instruction / Assessment

Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships

Using the Think-Pair-Share strategy (see Appendix E), have students reflect on the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Directions/Description

- Working individually, students identify what they think are the characteristics of a healthy relationship and the characteristics of an unhealthy relationship.

- Once they have identified characteristics for each category, students work in pairs to rank their top three to five characteristics in each category.

> **NOTE TO TEACHER**
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> Remind students to avoid using names or specific situations when providing examples of relationships so that the people involved cannot be identified by anyone in the class.

- As a class, identify the top five characteristics in each category.

- Then have each group identify what each characteristic would look like in a healthy relationship and in an unhealthy relationship, giving specific examples if possible.

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Suggestion for Instruction / Assessment

Relationship Values

This learning activity provides students with an opportunity to reflect on which characteristics or values are important to them in a relationship, and to what degree.

Have each student complete RM 1–HR. Encourage students to elaborate on their answers, using more paper as needed.

Refer to RM 1–HR: Relationship Values.

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Background Information

Benefits of Healthy Relationships

Our psychological health and physical well-being depend heavily on our ability to form close relationships. The process of relationship building begins with our families, moves to the formation of friendships, and may eventually lead to romantic relationships. All these relationships help us to develop interpersonal skills and provide experiences that assist us in fine-tuning our emotions and feelings.

Our first relationships are with our parents or caregivers. When caregivers feed and nurture children, they provide a sense of security, trust, and belonging, thus forming a powerful mutual bond. Children who are benefiting from healthy, loving, and nurturing relationships will seek proximity or contact with their caregivers. As adults, these individuals will be more likely to trust other people, feeling secure that they won't be abandoned or rejected. This initial relationship with caregivers has implications on many of the relationships that will follow.

Children who do not experience a secure, healthy relationship in early childhood may become avoidant, resistant, or ambivalent toward their parents/caregivers. As adolescents and adults, these individuals may have a difficult time trusting friends and intimate partners, or letting people get too close for fear of being hurt or rejected.

One of the keys to creating a meaningful and special relationship for life is to affect someone positively at an emotional level. Caring about someone, particularly at a time of need, learning to have faith and trust in others and ourselves, and sharing ourselves with others are some ways to build healthy relationships and to bring about positive outcomes, which will enrich our lives and the lives of others.

Factors Affecting Relationships

In all relationships, people experience times of difficulty. Problems often arise because the people in the relationships have different expectations, become distracted with other issues, or have difficulty expressing what is on their minds. Some of the issues or concerns are controllable, while others are, or are perceived to be, uncontrollable. Common problems exist in most relationships and, if they remain unresolved, can lead to a break-up.

Examples of issues encountered in the common problem areas in relationships are listed below.

Practical/ Logistical Issues	Compatibility Issues	Commitment Issues	Affection/Intimacy Issues
▪ Physical distance from partner ▪ Financial issues ▪ Family issues (e.g., family acceptance)	▪ Age/maturity ▪ Values or beliefs ▪ Personal character and attitude ▪ Personal goals ▪ Culture and language ▪ Religion ▪ Intellect	▪ Too busy with other activities/ people ▪ Unsupportive of partner's needs, goals, activities ▪ Issues of infidelity	▪ Communication issues ▪ Power and control ▪ Attraction issues ▪ Mental-emotional issues (e.g., low self-esteem, jealousy) ▪ Behaviours associated with demonstrating affection/intimacy ▪ Emotional or physical abuse

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Suggestion for Instruction / Assessment

What's the Problem?

Using the Carousel Brainstorming strategy (see Appendix E), have students identify common issues under each of the four common problem areas in relationships.

Directions/Description

▪ On separate pieces of flipchart paper, write the four common problem areas encountered in relationships:

Practical/ Logistical Issues	Compatibility Issues	Commitment Issues	Affection/ Intimacy Issues

▪ Divide the class into four groups and assign each group to one of the four problem areas identified.

▪ Give the groups a specific amount of time to brainstorm and record their ideas about possible examples related to the problem area.

- After the allotted time has expired, have the groups move to the next flipchart paper with a different problem area. The groups review the examples already recorded and offer others if they can. This process continues until each group has visited each of the four problem areas.

- Allow groups to revisit their original problem area to view additional examples offered by the other groups.

Possible Debriefing Questions

1. Did you have any difficulty identifying examples under any of the problem areas? If so, under which one(s)?

2. Did any of the examples seem trivial? Explain.

3. Do any of the four problem areas seem more problematic than others? Explain.

Suggestion for Instruction / Assessment

Reflecting on Relationships

Have students reflect on relationships by completing RM 2–HR.

Refer to RM 2–HR: Reflecting on Relationships.

Students will be asked to review their responses to the questions, and revise any of their comments, at the end of Module E, Lesson 4.

> **NOTE TO TEACHER**
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> Due to the sensitive nature of this learning activity, please be aware of and follow divisional policies/guidelines with respect to the delivery of sensitive content. Also be aware that there may be disclosures which, by law, you must report to the appropriate authorities.
>
> As this learning activity is personal and confidential, students would not hand it in. Simply ensure that it has been completed.

Background Information

Communication: The Cornerstone to Healthy Relationships

A relationship does not exist without communication. A *healthy relationship* does not exist without effective communication. Through effective communication we create the characteristics of healthy relationships, such as trust, openness, and intimacy. We need effective communication to resolve conflicts, solve problems, and make decisions that contribute to the strength of a relationship. While patterns of communication may vary according to our personal style and family and cultural background, being able to express our values, opinions, feelings, and dreams is important in any meaningful relationship.

Everything we know about ourselves and others can only be processed through some form of communication. Effective communication is a shared responsibility that involves both sending and receiving messages. Strategies for effective communication involve verbal skills, active listening, and the ability to resolve problems or issues.

Communication in relationships is one of the most complex and strategic activities of human beings. It often takes place at an emotional level as we disclose our likes and dislikes, our opinions and suggestions, and our wants and needs. This intimate form of communication is best done face to face when each person is able to use the full range of verbal and non-verbal nuances of communication so that a message is delivered clearly and received without misunderstandings.

We traditionally establish our communication skills by observing and imitating others around us. It is, therefore, important to provide students with many opportunities to practise effective communication strategies.

Technological Means of Communication

We are living in an age that places great importance on communication. Never before has communication been as prolific or as fast as it is today. Advances in the way we communicate are being made daily through technology that involves computers, the Internet, satellites, and more. The methods of communication now available through technology include wired, wireless, and mobile voice messaging, text messaging, email, and a variety of Internet options (e.g., chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs, personal web pages).

All methods of communication serve a purpose, but each method still requires the same considerations of trust, respect, and kindness. It becomes increasingly difficult, in the many forms of modern communication, to convey emotional messages when the subtle shades of meaning expressed through verbal and non-verbal communication are not present. What we say is important in any meaningful relationship, but how we say something is also a vital part of the message. In fact, much of what we say is "heard" through non-verbal means of communication (e.g., body language, tone, pitch, emotion).

ELEMENTS OF COMMUNICATION

A message is constructed of the following elements (Meade):

- **Words** (what you say) account for 7% of the message.
- **Voice and tone** (e.g., pitch, volume) account for 38% of the message.
- **Body language** (e.g., posture, facial expression, proximity) accounts for 55% of the message.

Forming and building relationships by technological means is not without its risks and dangers. Conversing with someone via email or text messaging has left many people wondering exactly how a message was meant and has resulted in critical misunderstandings and conflict. Connecting and building a relationship with someone on the Internet, where anonymity and pretence are pervasive, has led to many unfortunate and life-threatening situations.

REFERENCES

For additional information on communication, refer to the following websites:

Kelly Services, Inc. "Effective Communication." *Careers.* 2009.
        <www.kellyservices.ca/web/ca/services/en/pages/effectivecommunication.html>.

Meade, Lynn. "Nonverbal Communication." *The Message.* 16 Jan. 2003.
        <http://lynn_meade.tripod.com/id56.htm>.

For website updates, please visit Websites to Support the Grades 11 and 12 Curriculum at
        <www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/physhlth/>.

Suggestion for Instruction / Assessment

How Do I Say It?

Keeping in mind the elements of a message, have a class discussion about the appropriate use of various modes (e.g., face to face, email, texting, instant messaging, letters) of communicating various messages (e.g., greeting, arguing, breaking up) within a relationship and what the positive or negative impact may be. Have students consider how modes of communication in relationships may differ between generations.

Background Information

Steps to Loving Communication*

The following steps are ways to ensure healthy communication that is open, trusting, and reciprocal:

1. **Have reasonable expectations.** Keep in mind that partners are not mind readers. Tell each other what you mean. There will be times when you disagree.

2. **Know your own feelings.** If you feel unhappy or uncomfortable, take time to think about how you really feel and why, so you can do something about it.

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* Source: Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba, 2003. Adapted with permission.

3. **Recognize and correct communication-blocking habits.** Try not to generalize with "Never" or "Always" statements. Work at not belittling someone who disagrees with you.

4. **Think before you speak.** Take a deep breath so you have time to think about what you want to say and can say it with care. Focus on the behaviour or issue and not the person. Use respectful language.

5. **Allow the other person to save face.** Don't embarrass your partner in public by arguing or putting him or her on the defensive in front of friends.

6. **Use assertive communication.** Use assertive language, such as "I" statements (e.g., I feel frustrated when you are late).

7. **Decide what is negotiable and what is not.** Know where and when to compromise and when to let well enough alone.

8. **Make time for communication.** Your relationship deserves time, so make time to be together and just talk to each other.

9. **Learn to listen.** Don't jump to conclusions.

10. **Give each other compliments and positive comments.** It's sometimes harder to say something to show you care than to argue.

Styles of Communication

Just as there are various modes of communication, there are also different styles of communication. The following represent four common styles of communication:

- **Passive-passive communication** is viewed as non-participatory. There is very little interaction. Passive communicators are seen as shy and withdrawn. They would much rather "go with the flow" than face a confrontation.

- **Passive-aggressive communication** is viewed as manipulative. Passive-aggressive communicators may seem to agree to avoid confrontation (passive) but will manipulate others to say things for them or say things behind someone's back (aggressive).

- **Aggressive-aggressive communication** is viewed as controlling. Aggressive communicators will take control and dominate conversations. In order to "win," aggressive communicators feel they need to put others down to protect themselves.

- **Assertive-assertive communication** is viewed as open and honest. Assertive communicators are respectful and turn potential win-lose situations into win-win or win-learn situations. Assertive communicators will be direct, use "I" statements, and be sensitive to others. Assertive communication is seen as the most effective style of communication.

While it is important for students to know the characteristics of these four styles of communication, this module focuses on how to communicate assertively. In Module E, Lesson 3, students have opportunities to develop and practise assertive communication skills.