

Committed Relationships and School



As a student, you are juggling multiple roles and responsibilities. Hopefully you have not fallen into the trap of doing nothing but going to school, studying, eating and sleeping. It is important to have balance in your life – regular exercise, social activities, and of course, relationships. Not only will you enjoy life more but you will also be a more effective student.

Being a student and trying to have any kind of relationship can be very difficult – no time, dealing with the pressure of school, changing interests, changing roles. However, relationships with others can provide emotional support as you cope with the stresses of school.

Maintaining any type of committed relationship can be frustrating and confusing. It is important to be able to communicate effectively, especially during the rough spots. Ideally, you and your significant other have already discussed the changes in your relationship that may happen as a result of the challenges of being a student, but if you haven't, it's never too late. Below are some topics that it may be helpful to address.

Expectations

Some common expectations you may have as a student:

- may expect to lead irregular hours and to be able to drop everything else in order to do the “crash” project of the day
- may place a high value on independent, spontaneous activity
- may tend to put your relationships “on hold” while you're in school
- may expect that difficulties such as unequal division of labor will magically disappear once you graduate

Your partner, however, may have different expectations:

- may expect you to provide predictable time
- may expect to work together on common interests
- probably expects to play, love and to communicate
- expectations for attention, emotional support and affection carry implicit expectations of time together.

You, as the student, may feel that you don't have the time to fulfill all of your partner's expectations.

Couples who feel satisfied with both their relationships and their academic pursuits tend to understand what the others' expectations are, reduce or modify expectations as needed,

and then learn how to establish clear strategies and routines for fulfilling those re-adjusted expectations.

Communication

Maintaining a good relationship requires clear, direct communication. Couples need to express positive feelings, negative feelings, complaints, needs, and of course, affection. Participating in a relationship while in school can lead to emphasis being placed on academics rather than relationships. The student may place more importance on intellectual and academic activities rather than emotion, relationships, and connectedness. Resolving these differences can require careful negotiation. It is important for the student to communicate that their partner's needs and activities are important also and to remember that the impact of all decisions on each partner is equally important.

Boundaries

Boundaries, especially time boundaries, are important because in school there is always more to be done. This does not go away at graduation! Therefore it is important to learn how to set priorities and limits now. You will be more effective in school and in your career if you adopt a lifestyle that allows time to take care of your work **and** your relationships.

How do you do this?

- Schedule regular and specific time to spend with your partner and/or friends, free of school and other household responsibilities
- Plan a weekly “date night”
Try treating these scheduled times as you would any other important meeting, such as with a boss or your advisor
- Learn how to say “no” to activities or obligations that get in the way of the priorities you have set.

If you are in a committed relationship, learn to discuss any changes you are considering that affect both of you. It is important to listen to your partner and to include them in school-related activities

Common difficulties:

Successful relationships require each partner to take the others' pressures, needs and wants seriously and to negotiate with both people's needs in mind. It is important to learn how to resolve these issues as they come up and not just say “it will get better after I graduate”.

Money problems:

No matter how careful you are, you may not have enough money. If this is the case, you may want to consider loans rather than taking on a job or an extra job. It is Important that both partners are involved in the decision-making.

Time shortage:

It goes without saying that there is too much to do and too little time to do it. It is very important to have realistic schedules, recognizing that there is only 24 hours in a day and that you may have to give something up.

Focus on your priorities when deciding what to eliminate from your schedule.

Communication break-downs

No matter how hard you try, you will occasionally have “communication breakdowns” with the people you care about. This happens when what the speaker actually says is not perceived correctly by the listener. Unfortunately, the impact is usually negative. The reaction can be anything from mild frustration or confusion, to anger and hurt.

The first step in resolving this break-down is for the listener to identify what they are feeling and then to communicate this to the speaker in order to clarify whether that was their intent.

Flexibility of roles

It is important to share responsibilities for the relationship and, if you live together, for household responsibilities. One person cannot be expected to be responsible for making all of the plans, doing the inviting, etc. It is easy to fall into the habit of considering your own priorities always being the most important. You must be careful with this.

Sometimes, such as at exam time, your priorities are more important, but everyone must remain flexible and try to come to some sort of agreement. However, both parties should avoid being so flexible that you end up resenting the other person.

Psychology of postponement

When you are in school, it is easy to fall into the trap of putting things off, i.e. - after exams, after this rotation, after graduation. This can become a hard habit to break – there seems to always be one more reason to put off relationship tasks.

Parallel Lives

This is another dangerous habit you want to prevent. It is very easy to learn to lead separate, parallel lives with separate interests, activities and friends during the educational process. Begin to learn how to build and maintain shared interests and a life in common. Everyone needs and wants separate identities, however, don't lose what you gained in your relationship by failing to take care of your shared focus.