

Assessing personal relationships

I was thinking recently about how to assess our personal relationships. I have written many articles about the importance of our authenticity — that we stay true to ourselves, honour our feelings and try not to deny ourselves. This can get tricky when we think about personal relationships because there is then a second person to consider in this mix. How do we get the balance between being true to ourselves and honouring our feelings about others, at the same time as being able to accept and understand one another? How can we work out when to let things slide and when it is important to be honest about how we feel and maybe even communicate it?

So, I thought this article might be a good way to formulate some of the things that I had been thinking about, while also being a helpful guide and reflection piece for you to use when thinking about the variety of relationships in your own life, whether that be work, friends, family or romantic. As these are such a crucial part of our existence and well-being, I think it is helpful to give it some time and gain clarity about how we might assess and approach them for the benefit of ourselves and those with whom we are in relationships.

Keep calm and carry on

Maybe one of the greatest challenges that we face, particularly in the UK, is that we are generally taught to keep the peace, not rock the boat and, ultimately, keep calm and carry on. While there may be some benefits of this in certain contexts, the risk with this conditioning is that it can set us up to push down our true feelings. If we are taught to keep the peace, what does this mean for the times that we do not feel peaceful? We might be worried about speaking our truth and upsetting the other person.

Of course, in a job like your own, there are times that you need to keep a level head, not be overrun by anxiety and be able to do your job to the best of your ability, i.e. keep calm and treat your patient. But in our personal lives, we are presented with a whole host of different responsibilities, experiences and choices about how we approach and respond to something. We do not have a NMC Code to uphold, clear symptom reduction guidelines or best practices for wounds (well, maybe some kinds of wounds!). So, we can find ourselves at sea with

only our personal morals and values to guide us about the best way to deal with certain situations.

Conflict avoidance is another threat to our authenticity. Because so many of us are worried about upsetting the other person, saying the wrong thing, or having to face the discomfort and challenge of potential conflict, we usually shy away from it. This means that in order to keep the peace, we will deny or dismiss some of the more difficult feelings that we will inevitably have in relationships. Being human, and especially being in relationships, is an inherently messy thing. As much as we may try to keep things calm, predictable and nice, this is not the reality of what it is to live in this world, with the ever-changing feelings of being human and being in relationships.

But this is not to say that to be authentic is to be conflictual or difficult. As I am hoping to show in this article, there is a middle ground that we can reach, where we do not deny our true feelings, but we can still very much take the other person into consideration and find a happy medium between respect for self, and respect for the other. Before we move on to look at what this might look like, it could also be helpful to just take a moment to look at some of the rules that you may have been given in life about how you “should” be in relationships. As I have explored previously, these “shoulds” or conditions of worth are the rules that we are given through life about how we are told that we should behave (Molyneux, 2025). These are usually given to us by primary care givers and society and are another way to deny our authentic selves.

So, before we begin to look at some of the healthier ways we might approach relationships, it might be worth taking some time to think of what “shoulds” you might have absorbed about relationships. For example, “you should always give the benefit of the doubt”, “you should always be kind to others”, “you should always forgive”, “family should always come first” or “you should never upset others”.

As I have mentioned previously, there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these messages. But often, carrying these “shoulds” can be a guaranteed way to deny anything that we might be feeling that does not complement these messages. For example,

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having healthy boundaries may in fact upset some people, being kind to someone else may be disingenuous and deny your deeper feelings, or there are times when family does not come first. Think about what messages you would have been given by those around you about how to do relationships. And also, what this might mean for your true experiences that are counter to these “shoulds”.

Healthy relationship guidelines

Watch how you feel around them

This may be one of the most important steps we can take. Even if we do not feel ready to follow the other guidelines below, this one can give us instant data. It cannot help but start to enter our awareness and view of relationships. Sometimes, simply paying attention to how we feel in the company of another person, or after we have been with them, can be a real insight into the potential impact and quality of a relationship. For example, do we feel settled, authentic and expansive with this person, or do we feel tense, on edge or drained? Our body does not often lie and we will feel things for a reason. We may be able to convince our head by justifying, explaining away or analysing, but often we cannot do the same with our bodies. What messages is your body and emotional state giving you after you have spent time with someone?

Of course, this can vary and there are times when we will feel differently with a certain person, but I am focusing more on the general trend. For example, if I repeatedly feel tired after being in someone's company, this does not mean that I immediately have to cut them off or decide it isn't good for me. I can simply acknowledge this to myself, stop to think what this might be showing me and decide if we want to do anything about this.

We may value a person or relationship enough to acknowledge, yes, I do often feel tired after I have had some time with them, but I value them and the relationship enough to pay this price for being in their company. However, we may also use this as a guide to potentially want to change how we approach this relationship or even take some time to explore this with the person themselves. Exploring this openly with the person can often be a very courageous and challenging step to take, but it is just about recognising that this is an option we have. And we will look at how we might do this, in more detail, below.

Conflict can help growth

As mentioned, we may often do what we can to avoid conflict and try and keep things pleasant. As I have argued, this can often mean we might

be dishonouring some of our deeper feelings. To avoid all types of conflict inevitably means that we are not always being true to ourselves. And maybe that is something we are happy to do. However, there can also be great reward in trying to deal with conflict in a healthy way, often resulting in an even stronger relationship.

In counselling, this is referred to as “rupture and repair”. Rupture does not always have to happen in relationships (or counselling), but when it does, it can be of great importance, due to the learning and strengthening that can be found in the repairing part of this process. In fact, it often makes the relationship better than it was before the rupture.

Naturally, when conflict presents itself, we are likely to move into a more reactive state and may behave in ways we may not have otherwise chosen. For this reason, it can sometimes be helpful to take some time to acknowledge and think about the conflict in your own time and space. If this is not possible, or you feel able to be more honest in the relationship, then this can also be done in the moment, with the person themselves.

Although it may be a big ask, our aim is to be able to acknowledge conflict with respect and ownership. We don't have to accuse or react, but instead try and own our response (speaking from the ‘I’) without accusation. To give an example, rather than saying “you shouldn't have done that thing, it makes you a bad person” we might say “when you did that thing, I felt scared”. This gives the best chance of being able to have a productive and respectful conversation between you and actually coming to a better resting place.

Communicate clearly and early

Following on from the above, being able to communicate early, with compassion and clarity, also gives us the best chance of stopping any difficulties festering and building resentment. Our tendency may be to not mention something we have struggled with, hope it passes and keep the peace. But the likelihood is that these things will continue to happen and we silently keep hold of it, like a ticking time bomb. Quite simply, silence creates confusion and resentment, whereas clarity creates trust.

Again, I am speaking in ideals here. We may not always get it exactly right, but it can be helpful to know what we are aiming for. In these situations, it can be helpful to name the thing, if it feels important enough, with clarity and compassion. It may simply be naming the thing that happened, factually, owning how it impacted you and, if possible, also holding compassion for the other person. This may look



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something like “I know that you were probably just trying to help me out when you did that, but when it happened, I actually felt a little disempowered and I think I probably could have done it myself”. We may even explicitly state “I am just raising this because I care about you and I would prefer to be out in the open, rather than it being unspoken and fester”.

Our aim here is to be able to nip the problem in the bud, raising it early, out of valuing of the relationship and person, before it grows and is likely to come out in a more reactive way. Ultimately, this communicates care, valuing and compassion for the other person. It also illustrates that you care about the relationship enough to try and address a problem honestly, rather than hold it silently or talk to other people about it behind their backs.

Autonomy and boundaries

Our tendency may be to let things slide, mistake kindness for passivity and deny our deeper, more difficult feelings for the sake of a (supposedly) easy life. It can be a real challenge to have and hold our own boundaries, especially if we feel like it is impacting another person negatively. But my hope is that we can find a healthy balance between these.

Knowing where your boundaries lay (what you feel is acceptable or not – for yourself and in relationships) is an important part of respecting and honouring yourself. To know your limits and non-negotiables allows you to be in relationship with clarity and respect. It may also help the other person know where they stand and be clear on their expectations.

The beauty of being able to know and respect these things not only builds respect in your own autonomy, but also in the other person. Being clear in what works for us and what does not, and being able to stick to that, also makes it more likely to be able to respect the autonomy of another person, through acknowledging that you are two separate people with different needs, ways of being and limits. This gives a much greater chance of creating a healthier relationship in yourself, but also towards the other person and between the two of you as a whole.

Accountability

Another important aspect of this respect is accountability. And this works both ways – that you are accountable for your own actions, but that if it comes to it, you are also able to hold others accountable for theirs too. This may be simply acknowledging the impact of certain behaviours, but also respecting both

yourself, and the other, enough to value and communicate accountability in the first place.

And this does not need to be accusatory or punishing; similar to what we saw in the section on communicating clearly, it is simply being able to name and acknowledge the impact of certain behaviours or actions. This doesn't have to come with blame or admonishment, but simply a respectful acknowledgment, in support of the relationship itself. Again, keeping factual, speaking from the 'I' and delivering with respect and compassion.

Let go with grace when needed

Finally, when we have tried to follow some of the areas that I have outlined above, there may come a time when a relationship is no longer serving you. We can often see relationships (of any form) as a long-lasting, or even never-ending thing. But relationships inevitably have different lengths and forms.

Some of our growth might be in simply realising this fact – some people are around for months, others years, and others a lifetime. I think when we accept this fact, it may make it easier to start to bring in some of the approaches named above and assess relationships accurately. And ultimately, if it comes to it, being able to let go of relationships that no longer serve us.

To bring together many of the points I have mentioned in this article, if we feel consistently tense and anxious around someone, try to respectfully discuss some of these elements with the other person, and if we still face continued struggle and resistance from the other, then maybe it is just time to let it go. We may even have really great relationships that have simply run their course and we just don't feel it is right in our life anymore. Whichever it is, we can still let go with grace and compassion when the time comes.

What we find when we begin to look at relationships, like most things, is that they are not a predictable, smooth or consistent thing. And so, again, like most things, it is often about finding some kind of balance about how we approach these things. To be able to stay open, but know when to close the door. Let some small things slide, but name the big things early and give people chances, but do not give them unlimited access. And the more that we can do these things with respect, compassion and ownership on our part, then I believe we have given things the best chance we can. And if the outcome is that it cannot continue, then we can know that we have given it our best shot and held ourselves in a respectable way in the process. ●

Reference

Molyneux C (2025) The person in nursing: reclaim yourself from 'shoulds'. *Wounds UK* 21(1): 130–2