Sexuality Matters

Partnered Relationships

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- Describe different partnered relationships;
- List places where you can meet potential partners; and, 
- List various topics that can be discussed with partners at the start of 
  and during the course of the relationship.

In this lesson, we're going to talk about the variety of partnered relationships that 
are out there and things to be conscious of in each.

While we are talking about relationships, we don't want you to think that 
we're knocking being single.

Not being in a relationship has many benefits, like having more free time and 
the opportunity for self-discovery, as well as not having to make mutual 
decisions. Being in a relationship requires a lot of time and energy, and those are 
things that you're not always going to be willing or able to invest. At some points 
in your life, it may just be better to be on your own.

### Being Single

**Video Transcript**

Heather: Having a sexual or romantic partner isn't the most important thing in the world. It may seem like that, but it's not I promise.  
K-anna: I don't feel like I need validation.  
Heather: You're doing things for yourself. You're doing things because you want to, which may seem kind of scary at first. But it's okay to go to a restaurant and eat by yourself. Like if you want to go get Subway, you don't need to have a guy with you, you can just go on your own.  
K-anna: I am comfortable not being in a relationship because I'm comfortable with myself being single, if that makes sense.  
Chris H: Being single allows you to go out and not be restricted by the time commitments of a relationship. Or have to deal with the kind of jealousy that sometimes goes along with it.  
Heather: If you do find someone that you want to settle down with, you'll have that independence and you won't feel such an attachment to them or feel like defined by that person. And I think that it's good to go through a period of time being-- just hanging out by yourself.
Sexuality Matters

Let’s say that you’ve decided that you want some type of relationship. How do you go about meeting potential partners? In college there are many great places to connect with people, such as student groups, residence halls, classes, parties, intramural sports, study groups, houses of faith, Greek life, work, the gym, or through mutual friends. Often, some of the best relationships stem from friendships. It’s all about getting to know people and going from there. Be aware of the vibe that you’re giving off. Are you approachable and easy to talk to, or are you closing yourself off to others? People definitely pick up on these things, and it can alter how they interact with you. You might find that when you’re not actively looking for partners and are just going about enjoying your life, that’s when you’re more likely to meet that special someone. In many respects, college can be an ideal place to find people because campus is its own little city of people, many of whom are in the same age range. Depending on the size of your campus, there could be anywhere from hundreds to tens of thousands of students.

Where do you meet potential dating partners on campus?

Video Transcripts

Andrew: Where do you not meet potential dating partners on a college campus?
Robin: Events. Go to events.
Laura: If you meet them at the bar, they usually just want to hook up.
Ashlee: On a college campus, you could meet people anywhere, like I mean at clubs or at fraternities or sororities different kinds of parties, and things like that.
Olu: On a college campus, the doors are open and the options are limitless, and I’ve learned that early on in my college career. Finding someone—a dating partner—you’re not gonna wanna look in a place like a party. I know that is most commonly heard, but in places where you find common interests, you share common interests, like whether it’s just a class. Like in my marketing, it’s people who also find interest in marketing. It excites me. So, that’s where I would find a potential dating partner.
Alejandra: The success that I have had has been in places where you doing an activity that you like, doing something that you enjoy. And then, you meet someone else, and you’re like, “Oh, this person likes this too.” So, that’s always nice.
Janelle: I meet potential dating partners not on my own campus, actually. I am from a very small school, and the lesbian community in my school is even smaller.
K-anna: I’ve met a lot of good friends at bars who I never thought I’d be friends with.
Where do you meet potential dating partners on campus? Video
Transcripts Cont’d…
Robin: Join a student group and talk with people around you. Go to the
events that sound interesting to you. Especially free events on a
college campus are everywhere.
Maddy: People have to just sort of run into each other and go literally,
“Oh, I find you attractive!” you know.
Devyn: I’ve met lots of dating partners through friends. Sometimes in
classes. Sometimes at student organization meetings.
Nolan: I like to swing dance, and I’ve thought that one of these days, I’m
gonna meet somebody up there swing dancing.
Andrew: Pretty much anywhere on campus you can think of, you can
meet a potential partner. I mean just keep your eyes open.

What if you’re not on campus, or what happens once you leave?
The variety and amount of potential options can certainly change. Some
people find it more challenging once they start working a full-time job because
their interactions are limited to people at work or within their already established
social network. This is a time when you might have to get more creative. Find
something you already enjoy, or something you’d like to try, and see if there is a
club, group, or class in the community that relates. Maybe it’s a kickball league,
an art class, or a bicycle co-op. While you may not always find people who are
similarly aged, you’ll find folks who will have similar interests and the opportunity
for friendships, and you can go from there.

Another arena for meeting people is in the online world.
This could be through different avenues such as social media or dating websites.
Some of these services are free, while others, especially some dating websites,
may charge a fee. Dating websites may be more tailored to what type of
relationship you are looking for. Some, like the ones that are advertised on TV,
are targeted toward people who want long-term relationships that are headed
on a marriage track, while others are more focused on casual dating. There are
also websites and apps that are meant for finding anonymous sex. Dating
websites usually rely on algorithms or other methods to match you by the
personal information you submit and what you are looking for in a partner. If you
have pretty specific wants, these websites can help you weed through all of the
options and narrow it down to a select group of folks to choose from.

If you do choose to look for partners online, there are a couple of things to keep
in mind. Identify what types of relationships you’re looking for and carefully
analyze websites to see if they match your needs.
You can even ask your friends for recommendations of websites they have used. Be careful about the amount and type of information that you put out there. Some websites offer an internal email or message system so that you don’t have to use your personal email account. If you do have to use email, think about creating a new account to use just for these websites. You may be asked to create a user name and profile for others to see. Consider using just your first name or an avatar. Often, people start conversing online before they meet in person. Keep in mind that not everyone is completely honest in their profile, communication, physical description, or photos that they post. Sometimes we build up what we think someone is going to be like in our mind, only to discover that they are different in real life. Just know that online dating comes with its own unique challenges and benefits.

**If you decided to meet someone you’ve met online in-person, do so in a public place.**

Let your friends know where you are going and how long you’ll be there, and have your own transportation. Be cautious of giving out your exact address, as well. We’re not saying to never let anyone know this info, but you may want to wait a while until you’ve gotten to know someone better and feel like you can trust them. And finally, we wouldn’t be doing our jobs as public health advocates if we didn’t remind you to practice safer sex, if or when you have sex, regardless of where or how you meet a partner.

**What is intimacy?**

In a very basic sense, it’s when you feel connected to someone through some sort of bond or experience, which can happen in all interpersonal relationships. Intimacy can be cognitive, in that you grow closer by sharing thoughts and ideas. Or it can be emotional, in that you care about or love someone. Finally, it can be physical, which could range from holding hands to being sexually active. Through all of these types of intimacy, you can become more connected to that person. What types of intimacy do you want in your partnered relationships? Do you want all three types? Does this vary depending on what stage of your life you are in?
Next, we're going to talk about the different types of relationships.

We frame these in general terms and acknowledge that every relationship is different and does not neatly fit these definitions. As we go through these types, think about what might be the pros and cons of each for you right now. Do you think those factors might change as you progress through life? We’re not going to say that you have to follow any certain progression, timeline, or peak accomplishments or goals in your relationships because they are just that: your relationships. You decide what is best for you depending on what you see as your own needs and what fits in your life at that time. Certain relationship models just don’t work for some people, and that’s okay. It’s better to be honest with yourself than go along with something because you think that’s how you’re
supposed to act. Reflect on your values and beliefs to figure out what’s right for you.

When thinking about a potential relationship, consider these factors:
- Time and distance – how much time do you want with your partner, and how much do you need alone? Would you be okay with living in different locations, or is important to you to live in close proximity to each other?
- Boundaries – how do you feel about monogamy vs. casual dating vs. an open relationship?
- Values and beliefs – which ones need to align with your partners’?
- Labels – do you care what you call each other?
- Priorities – how important is a romantic or sexual relationship? How would you feel about a partner whose expectations about if or when sexual activity will occur are different than your own?
- Friends and family – what kind of interaction do you want between your partner and the important people in your life?
- Goals – what do you see for the future? Are you open to different outcomes?

_Casual relationships are those in which people may have emotional, physical, and cognitive intimacy, but don’t have a strong level of commitment to the relationship._

They are often short-term in duration. People may decide to have more than one casual relationship at the same time. This type of relationship may or may not involve casual sexual activity. Some would categorize hook-ups and friends with benefits into this classification. Both generally involve some sort of physical or sexual activity, but that is individual to the people involved in them. Hooking-up could mean making out to one person, oral sex to another, and anal sex to someone else. Usually, it is likely a one-time occasion, as opposed to friends with benefits, which may be viewed as a form of ongoing casual sexual activity with the same person.

Some young adults, especially college students, choose casual relationships over formal dating. The schedule and lifestyle of a college student is often hectic, and they may not have the time or desire to commit to the traditional view of dating. Though there are benefits to casual relationships, there are also potential downsides. Any time that people put sexual activity into the equation, there are bound to be
emotions involved. One person may want more than the other, or someone might feel used. While it can be great to not have to worry about a romantic relationship, you still need to respect the other person’s feelings. If you are entering into this type of relationship, make sure that you’re clear about your expectations and boundaries up front and throughout the relationship. Otherwise, someone is likely to be disappointed down the road.

**What does hooking up mean to you?**

**Video Transcripts**

Chris H: Everyone has a different definition of hooking up.

Ashlee: I would consider hooking up having sex.

Andrew: Casual sexual activity between two people that don’t have any intention of the relationship being anything more than one night or a few nights.

Chris H: I guess my definition of hooking up would be like making out or any kind of sexual activity.

K-anna: I define hooking up as having sex.

Abby: Maybe anything involving genitals to me is hooking up.

Danica: I think people use the definition hooking up really loosely. For me, it would anything from, like, making out to having sex with some people. But for some people, it's just having sex.

Luis: Yeah, me and her hooked up. You really have to delve a little more like "Oh well, what did you do?" kind of thing. So, I think hooking up is kind of the broad sense of the term and if you really wanna know what they did, you have to ask a little more.

Abby: But I don’t think I would say I hooked up with somebody who just touched my boobs. I think it's the genitals that makes it hooking up.

Devyn: For me, hooking up would be if I just had sex with somebody who I didn’t know very much or wasn’t necessarily previously involved with and only had sex with them once with no intention of continuing any sort of relationship after that.

**Dating—how do we even define it anymore?**

Typically, dating is viewed as meeting up with another person to get to know one another over some sort of activity, such as coffee, a walk, dinner, or rock climbing. Dating can be done with a group of people, or just the two of you. It can be formal or casual. It’s whatever you want it to be. Through the process of dating, you can determine if that person is the right fit for you and decide if you want to keep seeing them or instead move on. You may choose to date more than one person at the same time to find someone who clicks. It’s sort of like a test drive to figure out if you’re interested in pursuing some sort relationship.
**What does dating look like in college?**

**Video Transcripts**

Danica: People, definitely, have different definitions of dating in college.

Ashlee: Surprisingly, dating actually can happen in college. It's not just hooking up with different people every weekend.

Maddy: I've had friends who've moved in with each and lived with each other.

K-anna: The milestones come faster.

Andrew: Dating is going on dates. It doesn't. You don't have to be "dating" to be dating.

Robin: I end up doing a lot of homework around people.

Maddy: And then, I have friends who completely non-committal.

Danica: For some people, it's texting. For some people, it's studying.

Nolan: I don't think you can define it down to one thing. I've seen some of the craziest relationships that I've ever seen. I've seen some of the most tame relationships that I've ever seen.

Robin: Eating out a lot. 'Cause most of us are too lazy to cook or don't time to cook, at least that's my problem.

Danica: Um, for some, it's just going out on the weekends and hooking up.

Luis: It's really easy to hang out and there's a lot of things going on.

So, if you don't really want some thing that's an intimate date, then you can invite them to a party and hang out. You can invite them to study where you don't really have to interact that much.

Chris P: You are, are sort of free to see that person whenever you want. And they're generally really close by.

Janelle: I tend to date very busy, high-achieving people that um, have 10 things going on. And dating in that kind of context can be difficult in finding time to actually go on dates and when you're gonna sleep over at each other's houses and when you're gonna go have fun and when you just want to study together.

Devyn: I think that my dating life is quite a bit different than many other people's dating lives in that at any given time, I might have anywhere from 1 to 5 people that I'm dating and might be going on dates with like, a different person every weekend of the month or I might be going on dates with multiple people at once. But usually I spend most of my time with my primary partner and then less time with my other people that I may be dating.
What does dating look like in college? Video Transcripts Cont’d…
Abby: One of my longest partners was, we started out being friends and so we would go to concerts together. And we were always hanging out in groups. And then, slowly, we just realized that we really like each other and started dating that way.
Andrew: We’re about 400 miles away, so about 6-hour drive, 7-hour drive. We make sure to see each other regularly and call each other regularly. We don’t like to text a lot because then, when we talk, we have nothing to talk about.
Abby: So, it’s kind of informal, I think is how it ends up working in college.

Those four little letters: l-o-v-e. What do they mean?
While it is a subjective term, love can be viewed as deeply caring about another person. When you love someone, you are accepting them for who they are and everything that comes with that. It means that you support each other through the good stuff and the not so good stuff. You don’t worry about saying something wrong or constantly trying to impress the other person. You can just be you.

Telling someone that you love them for the first time can feel very vulnerable and you may feel like you’re taking a risk by putting yourself out there. Your partner may be comfortable letting you know that they love you back, but they may not be there yet, or they might not ever get there. Because love is subjective, let your partner know what it means to you. Talk it out with them and let them know why you wanted to say it. Even if they don’t feel the same way at that moment, you benefit from figuring out where the other person is coming from. We don’t all work on identical timelines when it comes to developing these feelings, so we shouldn’t expect that we’d both feel ready to communicate those three words at the same moment.

Resource
Ted Talk – “Why We Love, Why We Cheat” by Helen Fisher

Like many relationship definitions, long-term is a subjective label.
For some, long-term means seeing each other for a couple of months, while for others it means being together for multiple years, decades, or until death. Usually, the couple is in a mutually monogamous relationship in which they see each other exclusively.
People that are in happy and healthy long-term relationships typically have a more fulfilling sex life than people in other types of relationships. Why might this be? In general, these folks already share a mutual trust and understanding of each other, and as time goes on their level of intimacy gets deeper. They have worked out a way to communicate their sexual wants and desires and know the other person’s body and what they like. Because the frequency of sexual activity ebbs and flows as relationships go on, people may look into spicing things up and trying something new, which can lead to a wider array of enjoyable experiences. In addition, they have likely mutually figured out their safer sex strategies. We’re not saying that long-term relationships are the best thing for everyone, only that there are benefits to this relationship style under the right circumstances.

Resource

Depending on the couple’s desires, some will choose to enter into marriage.
Granted, this opportunity isn’t just available to folks in long-term relationships, but those are the people who typically take advantage of this option. Marriage can provide varying degrees of social, health, and legal benefits, though it can also come with its own set of challenges. It can mean transitioning from making decisions solely for yourself, to making decisions that affect both of you. Depending on values, beliefs, culture, spirituality, and other factors, each couple decides if they want to enter into marriage.

Long-distance relationships are often a frequent occurrence in college, especially among first-year students who continue to see the partner they dated in high school.
There can be many benefits to being in this type of relationship. Without having the frequent in-person contact with your partner, you’re able to spend more time focusing on school or other activities. On the flip side, you may not feel like
participating in typical college experiences because you don’t have your partner there with you, or you may spend your weekends traveling to see them.

New technological innovations have made it possible to feel closer to someone who is far away. Video chatting, texting, and digital cameras make it easier to connect. Even though you have these tools, you may still feel a sense of disconnect when you actually see your partner during visits. The absence of physically spending time together can make it more difficult to build and maintain intimacy, especially when you spend extended periods of time apart. If you’re in this type of relationship, be conscious of both your own and your partner’s needs. You can make it work; you’ll just need to find ways to keep the different types of intimacy alive. Remember, it’s not just the quantity of time you spend together that matters, but also the quality of that time.

Regardless of the type of relationship, each couple should decide on boundaries in regards to monogamy. Do you want to be exclusive? Or are you pulled more towards an open relationship in which one or both of you have other partners? Some people could never imagine sharing their partner, while for others an open relationship is liberating and brings the couple closer together. A couple may want an open relationship for a variety of reasons. They may be at a point in their relationship where one or both partners would like more than what the other partner can give them, whether that is sexually, intellectually, or emotionally, but at the same time still care about and want to stay in the relationship. Some people believe that open relationships can help prevent infidelity because each person is aware of the other person’s desire to be intimate with someone else. It’s not hidden; rather, it is openly discussed and acknowledged. Note, if the primary
Sexuality Matters

Successful open relationships depend on solid communication and agreement on details and boundaries.

Every open relationship is unique. Couples may establish rules regarding what types of sexual activities are allowed, such as the frequency of contact or whether the primary partner needs to approve of someone new or the location of where sexual contact can happen. Jealously often comes up, but partners who are trusting and are continually communicating do a better job of working through it.

One type of open relationship is polyamory. In these circumstances, any outside partners have more formal relationships, as opposed to only casual contact. As a result, intimacy and the possibility of a loving relationship may grow with outside partners.

Resource

Being in a relationship means that you should agree on basic ground rules and boundaries.

Think about what you want in your relationship now and in the future. What are your goals and desires? What does sex mean to you? How do you view your relationship? Sometimes we make automatic assumptions about our relationship without actually talking about it with our partner. It could be that you thought that you were exclusive, while the other person thought you could still see other people. Or it could be a friend with benefits scenario where you both said it would only be physical, when one of you actually wanted more and then became emotionally invested. Discussing these issues at the beginning of the relationship can prevent some confusion and disagreements down the road.

Ongoing communication is an essential part of any relationship. Keep discussing the things you talked about at the beginning of the relationship. For some people, things can change and it’s a good idea to check in with the other person. Relationships ebb and flow. Depending on what is going on in
other areas of your life, you may feel more or less connected with your partner. Letting them know what’s going on with you can help them be more conscious of how to support you.

**We do want to acknowledge that there is a societal pressure to follow a certain life course within a set time frame.**

This usually plays out as settling down with one person, making a lifelong commitment, and raising kids. Some people really want this vision for themselves, while other people know that it is not for them. They may only want a part of it, but not all of it. People in your life, especially family, may pressure you into this future. Once you reach a certain age, it’s nearly impossible not to get asked when you’re going to be doing these things. It’s been so ingrained in our culture that people don’t think twice about making assumptions and inquiring about where you are at in the process. Whatever you see for your future, know that it is your decision. There is no benefit to caving into pressure, only to regret your decision later.

We want to say a final note about your future. The exact details of your future are unknown. Be conscious of the possibility that you may not be spending the rest of your life with the person you think you will be, or perhaps you might; only time will tell. You will grow and change so much as a person, both emotionally and cognitively. Being aware of these possible changes can make future transitions easier.

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