

CHAPTER 12

Relationships

Tom Carskadon of Mississippi State University contributed his valuable and considerable expertise to the writing of this chapter.

IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL LEARN

- Who's off limits for dating and why
- The best options for long-distance relationships
- How to break up
- How to handle marriage and school
- How to deal with roommates

Now that you're in college, are classes and studies the first thing on your mind? Student journals suggest that what often takes center stage are relationships—with dates, lovers, or lifelong partners; with friends and enemies; with parents and family; with roommates, classmates, and coworkers; and with new people and new groups.

Relationships strongly influence your survival and success in college. If you are distracted by bad relationships, you will find it difficult to concentrate on your studies. If you are supported by good relationships, you will be better able to get through the rough times, reach your full potential, stay in college, and enjoy it.

Dating and Mating

Loving an Idealized Image

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung identified a key aspect of love: We each have an idealized image of the perfect partner, which we unconsciously project onto potential partners we meet. The first task in any romantic relationship, then, is to look beyond the initial attraction and see that the person you are in love with really exists! Anyone who can make your knees go weak and your mouth go dry at a single glance can affect your perceptions as well as your body. Are you in love, or are you in lust? People in lust often sincerely believe they are in love, and more than a few will say almost anything to get what they want. But would you still want that person if sex were out of the question? Would that person still want you?

Folklore says love is blind. Believe it. Check out your perceptions with trusted friends. If they see a lot of problems that you do not, at least listen to them. Another good reality check is to observe the other person's friends. Exceptional people rarely surround themselves with jerks and losers. If the person of your dreams tends to collect friends from your nightmares, wake up!

Off Limits!

Some “fishing grounds” are strictly off limits. Never become romantically involved with your teacher or someone who works over or under you. If you date a subordinate, when the relationship ends you may find yourself accused of sexual harassment, fired, or sued. Even dating coworkers carries major risks; it will be much harder to heal from a breakup if you must continue to work together.

Gay and Lesbian Relationships

Although most people build intimate relationships with someone of the opposite sex, some people are attracted to, fall in love with, and make long-term commitments to a person of the same sex. Gay or straight, your sexuality and whom you choose to form intimate relationships with are an important part of who you are.

You need to know that professionals do not consider homosexuality a disease or a mental disorder. Most experts—and most gays and lesbians—believe that sexual orientation is inborn, and that no amount of “treatment,” prayer, or anything else is going to change it.

If you are heterosexual, these facts may be puzzling, even troubling, to you. But try putting the shoe on the other foot, as psychologist Robert Feldman suggests. If questions like the following seem stupid to you, they seem just as stupid when heard by gays and lesbians about their sexuality:

*What caused your heterosexuality? When and how did you choose it?
Why do you flaunt your heterosexuality and try to involve others in this lifestyle? Why do you heterosexuals think about sex so much?
Wouldn't a good relationship with a skilled homosexual lover make your heterosexuality go away?*

Your sexuality is your own; it isn't dictated by your family, by society, or by what the media present as normal. Although listening to your feelings is important, it may also help to talk about those feelings with someone you trust.

Consult a professional counselor, who helps people with these issues every day. (Most campuses have professional counseling available.) Read

about sexuality and sexual orientation. It is important to remember that relationships that involve communication, trust, respect, and love are crucial to all people.

Developing a Relationship

Early in a relationship, you may be wildly “in love.” You may find yourself pre-occupied—if not obsessed—with the other person, with feelings of intense longing when you are apart. When you are together, you may feel thrilled and blissful, yet also insecure and demanding. You are likely to idealize the other person, yet you may overreact to faults or disappointments. If the relationship goes awry, your misery is likely to be intense, and the only apparent relief from your pain lies in the hands of the very person who rejected you. Social psychologist Elaine Walster calls this the stage of *passionate* love.

Most psychologists see the first stage as being unsustainable—and that may be a blessing! A successful relationship will move on to a calmer, more stable stage. At this next stage, your picture of your partner is much more realistic. You feel comfortable and secure with each other. Your mutual love and respect stem from predictably satisfying companionship. Walster calls this more comfortable, long-lasting stage *companionate* love.

If a relationship is to last, it is vital to talk about it as you go along. What are you enjoying, and why? What is disappointing you, and what would make it better? Is there anything you need to know? If you set aside a regular time and place to talk, communication will be more comfortable.

Long-Distance Relationships

Many students arrive at college while still romantically involved with someone they left behind. If you restrict yourself to a single, absent partner, you may miss out on a lot, and this often leads to cheating or resentment. Our advice for long-distance relationships: Keep seeing each other as long as you want to, but with the freedom to pursue other relationships, too.

Becoming Intimate

Sexual intimacy inevitably adds a new and powerful dimension to a relationship. We suggest the following:

- Don't hurry into it.
- If sexual activity would violate your morals or values, don't do it. And don't expect others to violate theirs. You do not owe anyone justifications, nor should you put up with attempts to argue you into submission.

- If you have to ply your partner with alcohol or other drugs to get the ball rolling, you aren't engaging in sex—you are committing rape.
- Consult a professional about pregnancy prevention. A pregnancy will drastically curtail your freedom and social life, and finding time for your studies will be much harder. Conception can occur even when couples take precautions. Data based on real-life (as opposed to theoretical) use indicate that students who are sexually active for five years of college and use condoms for birth control all five years have, on average, about a 50–50 chance of having to deal with a pregnancy during college.

When passions run high, physical intimacy can feel like emotional intimacy but sex is an unsatisfying substitute for love or friendship.

Genuine emotional intimacy is knowing, trusting, loving, and respecting each other at the deepest levels, day in and day out, independent of sex. Establishing emotional intimacy takes time—and, in many ways, takes more courage. If you build the emotional intimacy first, not only the relationship but even the sex will be better.

An interesting question is whether sex actually adds to your overall happiness. Believe it or not, a thorough review of the literature on happiness finds no evidence that becoming sexually active increases your general happiness. Sex relieves horniness, but it doesn't ensure happiness. Loving relationships, on the other hand, are powerfully related to happiness.

If you want sexual activity but don't want all the medical risks of sex, consider the practice of “outercourse,” mutual and loving stimulation between partners that allows sexual release but involves no exchange of bodily fluids.

Getting Serious

Although dating more than one person can help you clarify what you want, multiple sexual relationships can be dangerous. Besides the health risks involved, it's rare to find a good working relationship where the partners have sex with others. Sexual jealousy is very powerful and can arouse insecurities, anger, and hurt in a heartbeat.

Being exclusive provides the chance to explore a relationship in depth and get a taste of what marriage might be like. But if you are seriously considering marriage, consider this: Studies show that the younger you are, the lower your odds of a successful marriage. It may also surprise you to learn that trial marriage or living together does not decrease your risk of later divorce.

Above all, beware of what might be called “the fundamental marriage error”: marrying before both you and your partner are certain about who you are and what you want to do in life. If you want to marry, the person to marry is someone you could call your best friend—the one who knows you inside

and out, the one you don't have to play games with, the one who prizes your company without physical rewards, the one who over a period of years has come to know, love, and respect who you are and what you want to be.

Breaking Up

In a national study of 5,000 college students, 29 percent reported they had ended a romantic relationship during their first year in college.

Change can be scary to think about and painful to create, but sometimes it's the only thing to do. When you break up, you lose not only what you had, but also everything you thought you had, plus many cherished hopes and dreams. No wonder it hurts. But remember that you are also opening up a world of new possibilities.

If it is time to break up, do it cleanly and calmly. Don't be impulsive or angry. Explain your feelings and talk them out. If you don't get a mature reaction, take the high road; don't join someone else in the mud.

What about being "just friends"? You may want to remain friends with your partner, especially if you have shared and invested a lot. You can't really be friends, however, until both of you have healed from the hurt and neither of you wants the old relationship back. That usually takes a year or two.

If you are having trouble getting out of a relationship or dealing with its end, get help. Expect some pain, anger, and depression. Your college counselors have assisted many students through similar difficulties. In fact, relationship problems are the most common student concern that college counselors hear about. It is also a good time to get moral support from friends and family. Read a good book on the subject, such as *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*.

You and Your Parents

If you are on your own for the first time, your relationship with your parents is going to change. A first step in establishing a good relationship with your parents is to be aware of their perceptions. Here are their most common ones:

- Parents fear you'll harm yourself. You may take risks that make older people shudder. You may shudder, too, when you look back on some of your stunts.
- Parents think their daughter is still a young innocent. Yes, the old double standard (differing expectations for men than women, particularly regarding sex) is alive and well.
- Parents know you're older but picture you as much younger. Maybe it's because they loved you so much as a child they can't erase that image.

- Parents mean well. Most love their children, even if it doesn't always come out right; very few are really indifferent or hateful.
- The old have been young, but the young haven't been old. Parental memories of youth may be hazy, but at least they've been there.

Some families are truly dysfunctional. If love, respect, enthusiasm, and encouragement are just not in the cards, look around you. Other people will give you these things, and you can create the family you need. With your emotional needs satisfied, your reactions to your real family will be much less painful.

Try setting aside regular times to update your parents on how college and your life in general are going. Ask for and consider their advice. You don't have to take it. Finally, realize that your parents are not here forever. Mend fences while you can.

Married Life in College

Both marriage and college are challenges. With so many demands, it is critically important that you and your partner share the burdens equally; you cannot expect a harried partner to spoil or pamper you.

If you are in college but your spouse is not, it's important to bring your partner into your college life. Share what you're learning in your courses. See if your partner can take a course, too—maybe just to audit for the fun of it. Take your partner to cultural events—lectures, plays, concerts—on your campus. If your campus has social organizations for students' spouses, try them out.

Electronic Relationships

Nowadays, through electronic mail, message boards, interest groups, dating sites, and chat groups, it is possible to form relationships with people you have never met.

For instance, there is a student who has regular email correspondence with the following group, who all met online: an aspiring screenwriter in New Jersey, an undercover narcotics agent in Michigan, a professional animator in Georgia, a college teacher in Connecticut, a high school student in Arizona, a librarian in California, a strip-club bartender in Tennessee, a mother in Pennsylvania, a police officer in Australia, a flight attendant in Illinois, an entrepreneur in Louisiana, a psychologist in Colorado, a physician in training in Texas, a school-teacher in Canada, and college students in five states and three countries.

The downside? Electronic relationships may be more transient and unpredictable than “real world” ones. People may not be what they seem. Meeting them in real life may be delightful—or disastrous. You could literally be corresponding with a state prisoner! Be very cautious about letting strangers know your name, address, telephone number, or other personal information, and about considering face-to-face meetings.

If you find yourself spending hours every day with people on the computer, you are probably overdoing it. Don't let electronic relationships substitute for “real” ones in your life. By the way, your college counselors have experience dealing with students suffering from “computer addiction.”

Roommates

Roommates range from the ridiculous to the sublime. You may find a lifetime friend or an exasperating acquaintance.

With any roommate, establish your mutual rights and responsibilities in writing. Many colleges provide contract forms that you and your roommate can use. If things go wrong later, you will have something to point to.

If you have problems, talk them out promptly. Talk directly—politely but plainly. If problems persist, or if you don't know how to talk them out, see your residence counselor if you live on campus, or seek assistance at the counseling center if you live off campus.

On-Campus Involvement

Organizations help you find friends with similar interests. And remember, new students who become involved with at least one organization are more likely to survive their first year and remain in college.

To go Greek or not to go Greek? Greek-letter social organizations (fraternities and sororities) are not all alike, nor are their members. Some students love them. But other students may find them philosophically distasteful, too demanding of time and finances, and/or too constricting. Take a good look at the upperclass students in the organization. If what you see is what you want to be, consider joining. If not, steer clear.

Many campuses have residence halls or special floors for students with common interests or situations, such as first-year students; honors students; students in particular majors; students desiring quiet space; students who shun tobacco, alcohol, and drugs; students interested in protecting the environment; and so on. These often provide very satisfying experiences.

Off-Campus Involvement

Co-op Programs

Many schools have co-op programs in which you spend some terms in regular classes and other terms in temporary job settings in your field. They offer an excellent preview of what work in your chosen field is actually like, thus helping you find out if you have made the right choice. They give you valuable experience and contacts that help you get a job when you finish school; in fact, many firms offer successful co-op students permanent jobs when they graduate.

Alternating work and school terms may be a more agreeable schedule for you than eight or ten straight terms of classes would be, and it may help you keep your ultimate goal in mind. Co-op programs can help you pay for school, too. And don't forget service learning, as discussed in Chapter 11.

Relationships are an integral part of your education and can consume a majority of your waking hours. Whether you're a traditional-age new student living on or off campus, or a returning student with family responsibilities, be sure to approach your relationships with the same effort and planning as you would approach your course work. Long after you have forgotten whole courses you took, you will remember relationships that began or grew in college.

YOUR PERSONAL JOURNAL

Here are a number of topics to write about. Choose one or more. Or choose another topic related to this chapter.

1. This chapter advises you to date others before making a commitment to one individual, but not to have more than one sexual relationship at a time. What is your reaction to that?
2. If you are a married student, what do you see as your biggest problems in balancing your family and your education? What is your plan for dealing with those problems?
3. Describe your relationship with your parents. Has it changed now that you are in college? What is your plan for maintaining and improving it?
4. If you have made friends with some people who are very different from you, write about those relationships and what you have learned from them.
5. If you have a roommate, describe the best and worst things about living with that person. What is your plan for dealing with the things that bother you?

6. What behaviors are you willing to change after reading this chapter? How might you go about changing them?
7. What else is on your mind this week? If you wish to share it with your instructor, add it to this journal entry.

READINGS

College Women Say College Men Don't Ask for Dates*

Most college women plan to get married and many expect to meet their future husbands at school; however, the college dating scene does not offer realistic opportunities to get to know potential partners, according to a study of heterosexual women at U.S. colleges and universities commissioned by the Independent Women's Forum. Although more than eight in 10 women (88%) say they are generally happy with the social scene at their colleges, they describe the campus climate as offering limited romantic options.

The most common forms of sexual interaction between college women and men offer either far more or far less commitment than most college women prefer. Women at all universities studied refer to the practice of "hooking up" as widespread, defining it as a casual sexual encounter (which may or may not include intercourse) often fueled by alcohol, with no emotional attachment involved or implied.

Although less than half (40%) of women surveyed indicate they have participated in such an encounter, over nine in 10 students (91%) say hook-ups occur fairly or very frequently (50% say very frequently) at their colleges. Women who have participated in a hook-up report feeling ambivalent afterward; most express feelings of confusion and awkwardness, even if they also felt "sexy" as a result of the encounter.

Women also say that most women who have hooked up end up waiting to find out whether the man is interested in pursuing a further relationship. Although some women believe participating in casual encounters is a sign of assertiveness, they also acknowledge that most often it is the woman who then allows the man to determine the nature of any further relationship. And many women who describe feeling hurt or rejected by such experiences blame themselves for having gotten involved in the first place—or for reacting emotionally to a sexual encounter.

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Women say that while men who engage in a lot of casual hook-ups tend to be described as “studs” or “players” by other students, women who behave in the same fashion acquire epithets such as “slut,” “ho,” “skanky,” “couch,” and “trash.” Some women say they engage in casual sexual activities to avoid the bother of a committed relationship, which they see as being too time-consuming. Given the model for the most common type of romantic relationship observed among college students, this is not surprising.

College students describe the typical committed relationship at school as a very intense, fast-moving relationship, in which the members of the couple spend virtually all of their waking and sleeping hours together.

Relationships that progress more slowly are rarer on campus, say women, even though most would prefer such relationships—or even the opportunity to go on “old-fashioned” dates with a variety of people before getting involved with just one. Less than half of college women (37%) report having been on more than six “real dates” since they’ve been at college. Even junior and senior women have experienced few dates at college: 47% of juniors and 50% of seniors have been on more than six dates. Further, many say the few dates they have had were tied to a structured social occasion, such as a school dance or Valentine’s Day.

Six in 10 women (60%) report having had at least one boyfriend while at college, even though some of them have never been on “real dates” with their boyfriends. Much of social and romantic interaction centers around simply “hanging out” in the dorms.

Women in the study are critical of the lack of structured social interaction and clarity about relationships on campus, and more than half (51%) say there are not clearly understood informal rules about relationships on their campuses. Women also complain about the men on campus being too passive about asking out women in whom they have an interest, and being more likely to prefer hook-ups than dates or relationships. Six in 10 women (61%) agree with the statement “There aren’t many guys here (on campus) who want a committed relationship.” Women are also invariably the ones who initiate a discussion about the nature of a relationship.

Many women note that they are trying to establish friendships with possible partners before getting romantically involved, but that there is often confusion in this case as to whether social activities are dates or merely friendly.

While the vast majority of college women (83%) consider marriage a very important personal goal, and 53% say they would like to meet their future mate while at college, the collegiate social scene does not appear to be conducive to getting to know potential mates. For the most part, women describe hooking up as being a purely physical encounter (some even cite the lack of conversation involved as a point in favor of hooking up). And “joined at the

hip” relationships are so intense and exclusionary that women involved in them feel cut off from socializing with others even in a non-sexual way.

Nevertheless, 83% of college women agree with the statement “The things I do in my relationship today will affect my future marriage,” and 86% believe that if they do get married, their marriage will last their whole lives.

A College Student’s First Lesson Often Is How to Live with a Stranger*

By Patrice Relerford

Meridith McLane is excited. High school is over, and college is just weeks away.

McLane, 18, who graduated in May from Crossroads School, will start Xavier University in Cincinnati this fall. Although she soon will move hundreds of miles away from her family and friends, she won’t be alone. She’ll live in a residence hall and have a roommate. Everyone she meets will be someone new—a big change for a teenager who pretty much went to school with the same kids for years.

“I’m always willing to try new things,” McLane said of the friendships she will strike up.

Relationships between roommates can be among the most lasting memories of college. A roommate is often the first friend you make, and some remain close for the rest of their lives. Of course not all roommate situations are idyllic. Still, say those in the know, there are ways to enhance this relationship or at least help it get it off to a good start.

Jill Stratton is associate director of residential life at Washington University. Stratton said sharing a room with anyone, let alone a stranger, can greatly influence a college student’s overall experience.

“College students (who live on campus) spend about 70 percent of their time in residence halls,” Stratton said. If they get along with their roommates and others in the dorm, they are likely to have a good freshman year, she said. “But if it’s not a good place for them to be—if there’s tension—it can negatively impact them,” she added.

McLane is too pumped to think about what can go wrong. To get the relationship going, she and her roommate called each other and sent emails throughout the summer.

What McLane knows about her roommate makes her feel optimistic. When they talked about their families, interests and boyfriends, McLane discovered

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they are both die-hard soccer fans. They immediately planned a road trip and bought tickets for a World Cup soccer game in Columbus in September.

Beth Lauchstaedt likes that McLane already has a feel for her roommate. Lauchstaedt serves as a residence hall coordinator at the University of Missouri at Columbia, managing student staff members and programs in three residence halls.

Lauchstaedt recommends contacting roommates over the summer to help break the ice. Nowadays, schools often send housing assignment letters to students before they arrive on campus that provide roommate contact information. That way everyone gets to know a little about each other before they meet.

During the getting-to-know-you conversation, Lauchstaedt advises roommates to discuss their background, interests, and the items they will bring for the room. "That way you're not meeting them cold, it allows you to put the facts with the face," she said.

During his freshman year, Kent Adams, 19, shared a suite with three guys at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, Mo. Although he and his roommates attended Kirkwood High School together, they had never lived with each other. Luckily, the four had no major brawls, but small incidents bothered Adams.

"You get to see what people are really like when you live with them," Adams said.

It took some time for Adams to adjust to his roommates' living habits, particularly how neat or messy they were. They sometimes argued over taking out the trash and what to watch on TV. He also stopped studying in his room. Too many other students would hang out at his suite because it was the largest on their floor. This fall, Adams will try living in a fraternity house.

Dee Kauffman is the assistant director of residential life at St. Louis University and has worked in education for 10 years. Over the years, Kauffman said, the worst conflicts have arisen between roommates who came to campus already friends.

Kauffman said friends often are afraid to talk about conflicts because they worry they will destroy their friendship. But Kauffman said even friends should discuss how to handle late-night phone calls, keeping the room clean, and other living habits because everyone eventually reaches a breaking point.

To reduce conflicts, SLU has a lower student-to-staff ratio in the residence halls for first-year students. In addition, residence advisors receive extensive training on how to handle freshmen issues.

At Mizzou [University of Missouri], Brittany Paris, 19, of St. Louis, reached a point where she didn't know what to say to her roommate. She grew tired of trying to make her roommate help clean their room. It wasn't that she disliked

the girl or that Paris was a neat freak. But she could no longer look at the growing piles of clothes, books, and moldy food her roommate left around.

“She had no cleaning ethic whatsoever,” Paris said. “Everything was always junky.” The experience was a culture shock for Paris. This school year she will live on campus, but she decided against letting the school randomly assign her a roommate.

Schools typically offer assistance in navigating these new relationships, but differ in how they handle roommate issues. During freshmen orientation at Washington University, students fill out an agreement stating how they will live. Bedtimes, cleanliness, and other issues are discussed by roommates and student staff members. The agreement is a reference point whenever conflicts arise, Stratton said.

At Mizzou, intervention is typically a last resort. Getting too involved in students’ lives conflicts with the idea that college helps them become adults, Lauchstaedt said. Students are expected to work out their differences themselves. If they decide they need assistance, a staff member will help draw up a “roommate contract.” In it, students outline things that are bothering them, such as bringing guests to the room all the time. Then they decide how to address the problems.

Despite all the horror stories, many first-year roommate experiences turn out well. Kenyatta Thacker, 24, is still friendly with her former freshman-year roommate. Thacker, now a junior at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, spent a year living in the residence halls. Now she has her own apartment, but she still deals with roommate issues.

Thacker, who mentors freshmen students, said many arrive at college not used to sharing anything. She advises making trade-offs and compromising. For instance, if one roommate brings a computer the other can provide a VCR or DVD player. The two can share the expense of a small refrigerator. However, some roommates want certain possessions to be off limits. No problem, but they should probably agree to that ahead of time, says Thacker.

Although there are pitfalls, living with a stranger can be a good experience. Thacker said it simply requires bluntness and not avoiding issues that need to be discussed.

“The most important question is what are your pet peeves,” Thacker said. “They are going to get on your nerves. Ask so you don’t take things personally.”

DISCUSSION

1. Your text claims that the greatest influence on college students is that of other college students. Discuss your reactions to this assertion. So far in

- college, which relationships are the most influential in the key decisions you make?
2. College students often set both academic and career goals—and the authors of this text have encouraged you to do this, too. Try setting *relationship goals* for yourself for your time in college. Kick around this idea, and its possible merits, in a group discussion.
 3. The first reading discusses the social/dating—or lack of “dating” scene on residential campuses for traditional-aged college students, with special focus on the phenomenon of “hooking up.” Discuss with fellow students how this compares to what really happens on your campus. What are the implications for your academic success and social satisfaction?
 4. The second reading considers the challenges facing residential college students moving away from home for the first time and living with a roommate who essentially is “a stranger.” Regardless of where you live and with whom, your living arrangements have a big influence on your chances for success as you start college. With your group, create a list of strategies that might help any college student make the most out of his or her residential situation.