

# Relationships

## Gay Men’s Health Fact Sheet Series

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Relationships help define how people react to each other and help to build supportive communities. Each relationship is different, and so the rules of interaction change with each and every person. Some rules are informal, and are passed down from generation to generation through cultures. Other rules are formalized, like rules of social etiquette, laws regulating marriage and divorce or laws requiring disclosure of positive HIV status between sexual partners. It is important to be aware of the rules at play in relationships to help establish one that is built on self-awareness and self-respect

### Relationships with Family

Experience with family varies from person to person. Family is often seen as a place of security and stability, a place where members celebrate life’s milestones (birthdays, anniversaries, deaths) and where they can return in times of difficulty. Some people have very close ties to their families. Others have experienced much pain and abuse at the hands of certain family members. Many gay men find that the family is where they first experienced homophobia.

There are more and more gay men who have started families of their own. Gay men have forged emotionally meaningful relationships of many different kinds outside of the traditional unions of legal or religious marriage.

This has often meant lengthy legal battles to gain recognition of their family connections. Issues regarding care of children, finances, estate planning, and advance directives in case of emergencies require the attention of all persons involved. Gay men forming families should seek out legal help from professionals with experience in these areas

to ensure the future needs of their families are met.

Like selecting a medical professional, having a lawyer who is gay and/or gay-friendly and who has experience in working with gay clients is ideal. Friends and community agencies can help you find competent law professionals in your area.

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### Relationships with Friends

If there is one area of relationships that gay men have developed significant skill and expertise, it is in the area of friendships. Gay friendships have been tested many times and have proven to be incredibly resilient. Gay men have learned that friendship can provide many things that family and partners sometimes cannot. Friendships give us freedom when times are good and support when times are hard.

Having healthy relationships with friends requires good communication and setting clear boundaries. Well-defined friendship roles help the friends know where they stand in each other’s lives.

## Relationships with Community

Gay men usually belong to more than one community. Communities can be based on neighbourhoods, shared ethnicity, religion, spirituality or culture, even shared leisure activities. Many gay men are leaders in their communities, and others are supportive followers. Finding a strong sense of identity in our communities and uniting with our supportive allies goes a long way to keeping us healthy.

Gay communities grew out of the connections made by gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons. These relationships were most often linked to the bars, bathhouses, restaurants and stores that served gay populations in large cities. Today gay communities can be found across Canada in communities large and small. There are sports and recreation clubs, arts, dance, music and theatre groups, academic,

spiritual, social and cultural organizations. They often hold a variety of events throughout the year, from pride parades to sports competitions, from health conferences to fundraising dinners.

Attending these events can help one to meet other gay men in the community.

Many gay men find that being part of several different communities makes their lives rich and interesting. Gay men who are part of organized religions or cultural backgrounds that do not accept homosexuality may not be fully respected because they are gay. This can create a conflict of emotions and values for the gay man who feels strongly attached to that community. Maintaining healthy relationships in these situations can be stressful.

There are associations of gays and lesbians from different religious and ethno-cultural communities that can provide information and support.

## Relationships in the School or Workplace

Many gay men started their coming out process in high school, college or university. Everyone has different experiences, but school is, at best, a vulnerable place for most students and even more so for the newly coming out or sexually curious stu-

dent. Having healthy relationships can be difficult when there is confusion around sex and sexuality. It is important to find allies who can guide young gay men safely through this time in their lives. Straight-gay peer alliances and gay youth groups can be one place youth can turn to for supportive relationships during this time of change and growth.

Relationships with co-workers are usually different from those with friends. Relationships in the workplace usually maintain a professional distance between people. Discussion of work, the industry or union business is welcome during work hours, whereas talk about personal lives is usually relegated to parties and coffee breaks. Sometimes personal lives and professional lives do meet, and sometimes they clash. Some gay men may experience homophobia in the workplace. Many employers have established guidelines for conduct among employees that explicitly state the rights of gay employees. This has helped ease tensions in workplaces and lets all employees know that gay employees and their work are valued.

For HIV-positive gay men who are working, confidentiality in the workplace is of utmost concern. Many workplaces have adopted policies regarding HIV/AIDS. These policies help to keep all employees (including HIV-positive employees) safe at work, which is in the employer's best interest.

## Intimate Relationships and...

### ...the Single Gay Man

Society clearly places pressure on individuals to form couples. This pressure often conflicts with the desires of some gay men to stay single. Staying single is a perfectly healthy choice. Not everyone is seeking a partner, and there are many ways we find growth and companionship without being part of a couple. Having a supportive network of friends and taking part in social activities are great ways to support living a single life.

### ...Having a Partner

There are many terms for intimate partners, among them lover, significant other, husband, long-time companion or boyfriend. Whatever the term, having a partner (or partners) can signify a search for growth, companionship and a sense of union with another person. Relationships don't happen by themselves. They require work and effort, and communication

### ...HIV

Gay men who are HIV positive have the right to be involved in sexual relationships. However, the fear of transmission of HIV, or re-infection with different strains of HIV can place

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extreme stress on a relationship. Canadian criminal law states that when sexual relations place a partner at a significant risk for HIV infection, the HIV-positive person must disclose their HIV-positive status. No gay man should assume that disclosure will occur in every sexual encounter, so be informed about what activities are considered risky for transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). There are resources available such as support groups, internet chat rooms, workshops, to help gay men in relationships where HIV is a concern.

## **When Relationships End or Change**

Once we establish an intimate relationship with another person, we may find that the relationship changes. This may mean that our relationships end before we expect them to. A time may come when friends and lovers separate, either temporarily or permanently. This usually means a big change for everyone involved. Both parties will experience some kind of loss. This can be painful, so it is important to find ways to deal with the separation while staying healthy at the same time. Just as it is possible to have healthy relationships, it is possible to have healthy break-ups. We can ask friends and counsellors for their help as we cope with the changes in our lives. Being able to accept change with dignity and grace is challenging, but it can prove to have long lasting rewards.

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Funding for this publication was provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors/researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

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