

Clinical Tips: Discussing Romantic Relationships

Discussing the impact of romantic relationships provides an opportunity to engage young people in a way that is validating and meaningful for them. It can also assist in finding opportunities for ongoing work with them to build their skills, prevent future problems or early help seeking.

The following are tips to use when discussing romantic relationships.

- Be mindful that young people can experience great intensity in their early relationships and may not have the emotional coping skills that are acquired with experience.
- It is important to ask questions about the nature of the relationship to engender an authentic interest (therapeutic relationship) and respect of the young person's relationship. This will also yield more salient details that allow the clinician to understand the young person's experience and level of distress.
- Some young people experience short-term, acute grief responses after relationship break-ups, especially if they have not instigated the break-up (although the person that decided to end the relationship may also struggle).
- These grief episodes may involve feelings of intense sadness, yearning, preoccupation, regret, physical sensations such as nausea, loss of appetite and sleep disturbance.
- Young people may be socially sensitive in the post-break-up period – e.g. feel embarrassed, humiliated, jilted, angry, self-conscious.
- While it is important to normalise these strong feelings (feeling angry or hurt) it is important to ensure that young people don't act out any distress in spiteful ways or harass their ex-partner.
- Similarly, it is important to ensure that the short-term disturbance of mood doesn't develop into a preoccupation with more enduring effects.

Most people, adolescent or adult, find the opportunity to discuss their post-relationship distress with friends, family members or treating clinicians settling and helpful. This requires that the people they speak with are genuinely interested and not dismissive or judgmental.

- Be sensitive to the ways in which a romantic relationship may affect existing friendships and/or family relationships and work to minimize disruption to these support networks.
- Be mindful that adolescents who are struggling to cope with a break-up may be at increased risk of developing a first depressive episode in the following months and (in extreme cases) to both attempting and completing suicide.
- Do not dismiss distress or assume they will simply 'get over it in time'.
- Consider how past/current relationships with caregivers and prior friendships might be contributing to current difficulties.
- Focus on building adaptive coping strategies for managing the difficult aspects of relationships. Discuss acceptable and unacceptable ways of coping with difficult emotions.
- Skill building in areas such as assertiveness, conflict resolution and negotiation, interpersonal skills and self-esteem may be helpful in building resilience and managing loss effectively. Anger management may also be appropriate.

See the headspace resource: [Working with Adolescents – Keeping Romantic Relationships in Mind](#)