Guide to investing in your relationships

Mental Health Foundation
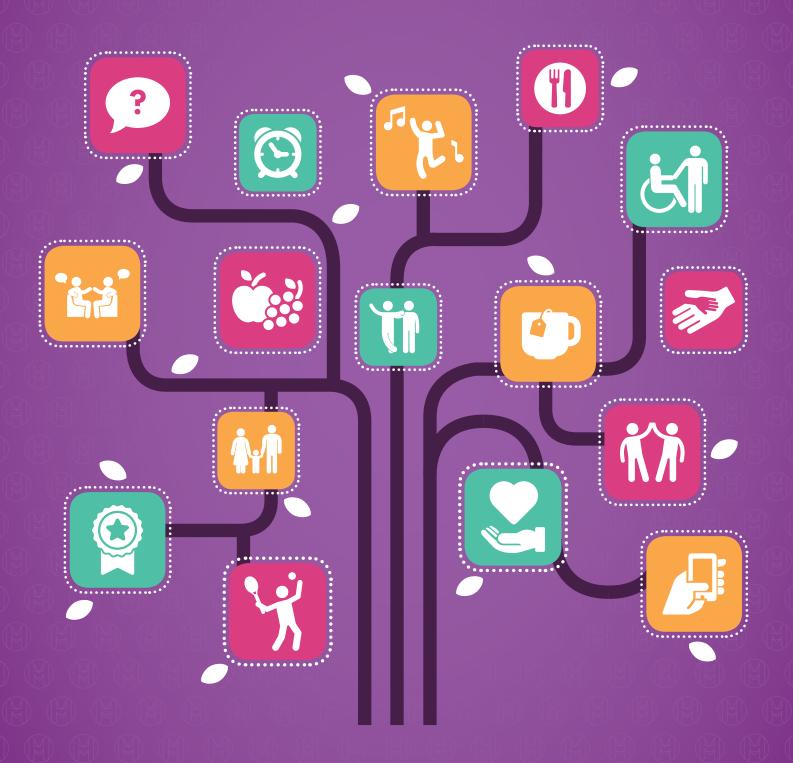
Good relationships protect our mental health and wellbeing at any stage of life. People who are more socially connected are happier, physically healthier and live longer.

Loneliness can be toxic to our wellbeing – our health declines earlier and we can have shorter lifespans. It's important to remember that it is good, supportive relationships that protect our bodies and our minds.

This guide will outline what each of us can do to create better relationships with ourselves, with the people we are close to, and with those around us.

The relationship you have with yourself

"The relationship with yourself sets the tone for every other relationship you have." Robert Holden

Try this exercise: imagine being in a relationship with someone you didn't love, found to be deeply flawed, worthless, and not good enough. Now imagine you have to be in this relationship for the rest of your life. How would that relationship feel? How would that relationship affect your thoughts, behaviour and day-to-day life?

It's important to evaluate the relationship you have with yourself. Ask yourself: would you speak to someone else the way you speak about yourself?

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation." Audre Lorde

Self-care is about looking after yourself and your mental health. The relationship you have with yourself is crucial to your own wellbeing and also to creating healthy and happy relationships with others. Being kind to yourself regularly is one of the best things you can do for yourself.

Self-care can look like different things for different people. For some, self-care might be taking time to rest each week; for others, it may be sweating it out at the gym or going for a run outside. Self-care could be going for a walk in one's neighbourhood, spending time in nature, or seeing or speaking to friends regularly. Here are a few habits you can start today that can bring about a positive change to improving the relationship you have with yourself:

- Invest in yourself. Spend 15–30 minutes each day doing something that uplifts you.

- When your inner critic or an outer critic finds faults, try and find truth and exception to what is being said.

- If you stumble or feel you have failed, don't beat yourself up. Act as if you were your own best friend: be kind and supportive.

- Do something to wind down at the end of each day.

- Take a few minutes each day to appreciate yourself.

The Mental Health Foundation has a number of guides to help you look after yourself. For more information on exercise, sleep and mindfulness, see: **www.mentalhealth.org.uk/howto**

Relationships with others

What do healthy couples' relationships tend to look like?

Healthy relationships should allow both people in the relationship to feel supported and connected, but also allow each person to maintain their independence. Communication and setting boundaries are two important components of a healthy relationship.

Healthy relationships

The following traits are often described as being present in healthy relationships.[1]

- Both people treat each other with respect.

- Both people protect and value the relationship and make it a priority – for example, they invest time in the relationship.

- There is trust.

- Both people listen to each other and there is compromise.

- Both people can be responsible for their own needs and also care for the relationship.

- Arguments or fights do not lead to abuse or threats (for example, break-up).

- Both people can speak openly to one another about their thoughts and feelings.

- Both people feel supported to do things they like and the relationship is nurturing.

- Both people are honest with one another and can hear feedback from each other without it leading to emotional abuse.

- There is no abuse: physical, verbal, or emotional (for example, silent treatment or ignoring).

- Both people are able to exert boundaries in the relationship.

Universal tips for maintaining healthy relationships

It is the quality of your relationship(s) that is key to maintaining your health and happiness more than the number of relationships you have. It's better to have a few close friends who you can speak to if something is bothering you than have many acquaintances. Tips for creating and maintaining good, healthy relationships in life are universal. The following tips and suggestions can help improve the relationships you have with those around you.

Give time

Put more time aside to connect with friends and family.

Be present

It can be tempting to check your phone, Facebook messages or even work emails when with family and friends. Try to be present in the moment and be there for your loved ones, and switch out of work mode whenever possible.

Listen

Actively listen to what others are saying in a non-judgemental way and concentrate on their needs in that moment.

Be listened to

Share how you are feeling, honestly, and allow yourself to be listened to and supported.

Recognise unhealthy relationships

Being around positive people can make us happier; however, our wellbeing can be negatively affected by harmful relationships, leaving us unhappy. Recognising this can help us move forward and find solutions to issues.

Relationships in community settings

The following section looks at what you can do to stay connected and maintain positive, healthy relationships with other people across different place settings.

School

What can teachers do?

The school environment plays a critical role in the social development of its students. Teachers can work together with students in a number of ways to avoid isolating classmates.[2]

1. Promote and encourage social interactions for children who may be struggling socially by avoiding 'last one picked' situations. You can do this by pre-selecting groups or drawing from a hat.

2. Organise a group of classmates to reach out to a student who is isolated. Schools can create form programmes such as buddying or peer mentoring.

3. Let all students know their classroom contributions are valued and give them opportunities to help others.

4. Arrange a classroom discussion around friendship. Ask students to feed back on what friends should and shouldn't do, with specific examples. This can be used as a foundation for any future discussions if a student is being left out.

University

Student mental health is an important issue to address in higher education. Having student peers and maintaining good social networks throughout the university years protects against mental health problems and fosters positive mental health during stressful periods.[3] Moreover, the support students receive from family and friends helps them remain in higher education,[4] which is important, as having a higher education is a predictor of social connectedness across life into later years.

The 'Look After Your Mate' guide produced by Student Minds supports you in looking out for your friends throughout their student years.[5] Some of their useful tips are shared below.

How you can support your friends

- Get the conversation started: do something relaxing. It's sometimes easier to talk openly when the focus isn't on the conversation you're having.

- Having the conversation: be prepared. It might be helpful to write down what you want to say.

- Keep up with the fun stuff.

- When it's tough, do small things to show you care.

- Look after yourself too – it's important to maintain boundaries.

Workplace

For staff, managers and human resource departments responsible for staff wellbeing.

The workplace presents a number of opportunities for people to develop their social networks. This can be through work itself, through leisure activities, or through shared interests such as sport and the arts. Approaches that increase employee health and wellbeing are also likely to influence and impact relationships in the workplace.

Typically, workplace wellbeing programmes and approaches focus on individuals by targeting things like healthier eating, physical exercise, smoking cessation and stress management. While these programmes have shown positive and cost-effective outcomes for individuals, it is also crucial that workplace wellbeing takes a whole-workplace approach by addressing the working environment factors (social and physical) that impact health and wellbeing.

Programmes should include:

- Enhancing employee control over their work.

- Increasing employee participation in decision making.

- Training line managers to enable them to lead positively and supportively.

- Engaging employees in the development of the organisation's goals to ensure that they feel they have a stake and can contribute to the success of the organisation.

- Providing employees with the in-work training and development they need to be able to do their job well, and providing feedback to enhance job satisfaction.

- Providing greater flexibility within a role to increase an employee's sense of control and allow them to improve their work–life balance.

- Reducing stress and improving mental health at work, as these are leading causes of sickness absence.

- Addressing any effort–reward imbalance – that is, where an employee's effort is not matched by reward from the employer, including through publicly acknowledging good performance.

It's important that any approaches or interventions an organisation invests in are available to all, and that everyone is made aware of the opportunities through good communication. Interventions should be tailored to reach employees who may have more difficulty accessing these, such as those in part-time work, working night shifts or on short-term contracts. Not everyone will be equally able to access programmes, therefore – although approaches should be universally available – they need also to focus and place priority on those most at risk of developing mental health problems. In addition, views and feedback from employees should be sought to ensure that any approaches taken to improve mental health and wellbeing are effective and demonstrate that employee needs have been considered. This serves to further engage and empower employees within an organisation.

For good practice examples of interventions that improve the health and wellbeing of staff and employees, see GOV.UK's report: 'Local action on health inequalities: Increasing employment opportunities and improving workplace health'.

How to promote better working relationships

As a manager:

- Foster open communication. Give people structured ways of enabling their thoughts, feelings and observations to be shared easily and regularly.
- Praise their efforts.
- Reward self-improvement by budgeting time and resources for management and personal development training.
- Encourage safe failure by giving opportunities to try new things without significant consequences to the organisation. Create innovative environments for people to test new ideas and learn from failures as well as successes.
- Support their independence. People want to feel in control of the work they do.

Both co-workers and managers should:

- Practise simple courtesies by saying 'hello' or checking in with colleagues. This can go a long way in creating a welcoming environment.
- Make new staff feel welcome by introducing yourself.
- Treat everyone with respect.
- Avoid office gossip.

Community

Some things that you can do to help strengthen community connections in your neighbourhood include:[6]

1. Being neighbourly. Practise common courtesies such as greeting neighbours when you pass them in the street. Getting to know your neighbours has been linked to lower crime rates, thriving children and greater school success.[7]

2. Organising a neighbourhood party. Engaging with members of the community to plan this will reap benefits in itself. It is important to be inclusive and try and support people to come along who may find it more difficult (e.g. older people who are housebound).

3. Volunteering your time to a local organisation. Being altruistic has been shown to have positive effects on wellbeing. Helping others is not only good for the other person, but it also benefits our own mental health. See our 2012 Mental Health Awareness Week (MHAW) report on altruism for more information.

4. Participating in neighbourhood activities and inviting people to get involved – parties, playgrounds, book clubs, walking groups, community gardening or community clean-up schemes, and community choirs are just a few examples.

Online

The internet has enabled us to make friends with people we don't know and may never meet in real life. For instance, Facebook has allowed us to create and maintain 'friendships' with more people than ever. These relationships may not always be adding value to our lives and, instead, may be sources of anxiety (see the 'Online communities and relationships' section of our MHAW Relationships Report). It's important to regularly assess your contacts on social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to see if they need to be adjusted. Some may be more casual acquaintances, while others may be people who would support you if you were in need. Not all 'friends' need to be party to all of your discussions, and privacy settings can be applied to enable you to have more intimate discussions with only a few good friends.

While it can be a lot of fun speaking to new people, especially if we are lacking social connection, there are also dangers associated with starting online relationships. It's important to stay safe online, as not everyone you meet online (e.g. in a chatroom, forum, or on other social media channels) may be telling the truth and they may not always be who they say they are.

Here are some tips for staying safe online: [8]

- Don't give out your real name unless you've been able to confirm who the individual is.

- Don't give someone online personal details (e.g. where you work or go to school, your address, or telephone number).

- Meet an online acquaintance in a public place. If you're a young person, you might want to meet them with one of your parents or another adult you trust.

  – If you are older, you may want to bring a friend, carer, or support worker along with you. If the person is genuinely who they say they are, they will be happy to accommodate this.

- Don't share your online passwords. Keep them in a safe place that other people won't be easily able to find.

- If someone online is making inappropriate suggestions to you or makes you feel uncomfortable, or you are unsure whether to share certain personal information, you can contact the police by phoning **999**, the Adult Protection Phone Line on **01383 602200** or Bullying UK's helpline on **0808 800 2222**.

Dealing with isolation

We are living in a generation where there are parents raising children while caring for their own parents.

The role of being a parent or guardian comes with a number of challenges. This is more so nowadays, when parents may have double caring responsibilities for children and their own parents. It can be difficult to find time together as a couple or to do things for themselves. However, for some, grandparents may be able to be a source of support if parents are returning to work or need a night off from parenting duties.

Here are a few tips for parents to avoid experiencing isolation:

1. Going online or picking up the phone can be a good substitute for face-to-face contact. There's a world of social connections to make and enjoy, even if you're at home or don't have the free time to meet with friends. Online forums and peer-support groups can help you connect with others who are experiencing similar issues.

2. Attending antenatal groups, baby groups, or parenting classes before a baby is born can help reduce isolation as well as be a space where new relationships can develop with a new peer group.

3. Take up offers of support from friends and family, and reach out and ask for help if needed. Often others are happy to help.

4. Caring for parents can be difficult. Organisations like Age UK, Alzheimer's Society and Carers UK offer a range of advice and support services. For greater needs, speak to social services about enlisting paid carers.

5. Becoming a new parent and caring for parents can put pressure on a couple's relationship, so it's important also to take time to nurture that relationship. Thoughtful acts such as making a cup of tea, cooking a meal, or words of affirmation can reinforce a relationship during stressful periods. If your relationship with your partner is at risk, then organisations such as Relate may help.

Isolation in later life

Older people are particularly vulnerable to experiencing social isolation or loneliness due to loss of friends and family, mobility or income.

There are a number of things we can do in older age to stay more connected to the people we love and also to create new friendships. The following tips have been adapted from the guide 'Staying Healthy, Happy and Connected in Older Age'.[9] While they have been outlined here as tips for older people, these recommendations can be just as readily applied to others who experience isolation.

- **Keep in touch with family and friends:** having regular chats with friends or relatives over the phone or online can be a good substitute for face-to-face contact. There are a range of supports available to help you go online if you haven't done this before.

- **Use public transport:** this can be a good alternative, especially if you are anxious about driving or have been advised to stop driving. Bus travel is free for over 60s in many parts of the UK, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. You'll need to check with your council about when you can apply for a bus pass. There are also services such as Dial-a-Bus and hospital visiting bus services available in some areas.

- **Learn new things:** if there's something you have always wanted to learn to do, why not try and see if you can do it locally? Staying active, joining activity groups such as a walking group, or getting a gardening allotment can be great ways to meet new people who share similar interests. Universities and colleges are not just for younger people. Many welcome people of all ages, and it may also be worth checking to see if they are offering any short-term or evening courses in a subject area of interest.

  Additionally, libraries may offer classes in a range of topics, such as learning English, ICT skills, knitting and craft – often for free or for a small fee. You can also join a local choir or singing group to help connect with others while doing something fun that is also good for your wellbeing. Local churches and faith community centres can offer a wide range of activities that are open to the whole community.

- The Ramblers Association is available to anyone who likes to walk, regardless of age: Ramblers Association England (**www.ramblers.org.uk/England**; **020 7339 8500**); Scotland (**www.ramblers.org.uk/Scotland**; **0131 472 7006**); Wales (**www.ramblers.org.uk/wales**; **029 2064 4308**); Disabled ramblers group (**www.disabledramblers.co.uk**).

- Interested in gardening? Your local council should have a list of allotments that are available for the public to use. The National Allotment Society lists allotments all across the UK. Visit **www.nsalg.org.uk** or call **01536 266576**.

- Volunteering can be a great way of meeting new people and developing new interests. In addition, acts of kindness such as volunteering are good for your own mental health. Joining neighbourhood schemes, local pressure groups or committees, or a formal volunteering programme are all worth considering. Less formally, you could offer to help neighbours who may need support or family members (e.g. looking after your grandchildren).

Many national organisations run volunteer programmes. The Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme helps older people use their life experience in their community and particularly welcomes volunteers over the age of 80. For more information, email **rsvpinfo@csv.org.uk** or call **020 7643 1385**.

If you are online, you can find out what volunteering opportunities are available in your area by checking out **www.do-it.org.uk**.

For more suggestions on where you can go to learn new things, or share your skills with others, check out the Wise Guide at: **www.independentage.org**

Get online: keeping in touch online can also be a good substitute for staying connected to friends and family who do not live locally. There is a range of internet providers and it is worth shopping around to get the best deal. Many phone providers offer an internet service as part of a package. Making phone calls through services like Skype, which uses Wi-Fi to make phone calls, means you can either have free phone calls to the other person if they also have a Skype account, or you pay a small charge (which is often cheaper than that of regular phone companies) when you phone from your computer to a landline or mobile phone. Skype allows for face-to-face contact, which can be a great way to continue to feel connected with friends and family who may live in other parts of the world.

Age UK runs computer courses all over the UK, which are mostly free and help individuals brush up on their online skills if the thought of going online seems daunting. Age UK's advice line is **0800 169 2081**. To find out where your nearest Age UK branch is and what opportunities are available, visit: **www.ageuk.org.uk/about-us/local-partners**.

Once you learn how to use the internet, it can open up a whole new world to you. It's a great resource for finding out things happening near you and can also be a way to make new friends who share similar interests.

Sites to check out include:

- **www.gransnet.com** – a social networking site for grandmothers over the age of 50. It also hosts forums for granddads (see: Granddad's shed).

- **www.silversurfers.com** – a website for the over 50s with lots of lifestyle information, news, forums and more.

- **www.laterlife.com** – a website for those in later life and retirement that offers valuable information about how to make the most of later life and retirement.

If you don't have a personal computer at home, you can usually find one to use for free at your local library, community centre, or Age UK.

Difficulties in building relationships

Not everyone finds it easy to stay socially connected or to make new friends. This might be due to being unable to leave the house, living a distance away from other people, or because social situations feel uncomfortable. Some people are more vulnerable – for example, if they move to a new area, have recently been bereaved, feel socially anxious, or live with a mental health problem that affects their ability to make and/or sustain relationships.

For individuals who are more isolated and have few social connections in real life, going online can be a source for meeting new people. If you are online, look for a website where people are either interested in meeting other people or that suits your interests. A few sites to consider include:

- **Twitter. www.twitter.com.** Follow people who share your interests, comment on interesting tweets from the people you follow and write tweets yourself – soon you will develop your own online friendships.

- **Friendsies. www.friendsies.com** is an online friendship platform where you can meet friends online. It uses a matching system based on personality and then sends compatible friends to your inbox. The best part: the site is free.

- **LiveJournal. www.livejournal.com** is an online journaling service and features communities discussing a number of topics (e.g. politics, sports, and television shows). You can post a journal, comment on others and make new friends. The basic service is free to members.

For individuals who are socially anxious, going online can be a good way of staying connected. It can also be a way of challenging any unhelpful thoughts that can act as barriers to socialising. Some online forums can provide a safe way of doing this through virtual social interactions. However, care needs to be taken to protect your privacy and ensure that you don't engage in unhelpful dialogues. You can unfriend or block people on sites such as Facebook if you feel that the communication is negatively impacting on you. Surround yourself with people who are optimistic and positive in their outlook.

If your social anxiety is more persistent and prevents you from participating in everyday life, there are also a number of support options available. Your GP can help you find an approach that will work for you. They may refer you to have cognitive behavioural therapy, which is one of the most effective treatments for social anxiety disorder. This may be offered online as well as face to face. See the NHS Choices Social Anxiety Disorder page here: **www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-anxiety**

Mindfulness is an evidence-based approach that can help manage stress and a range of mental health problems. There are a number of apps and online courses available, including books and exercises that are available on Kindle. The Mental Health Foundation provides an evidence-based online course for a small fee, available at **www.bemindful.co.uk**. One available app is Buddhify. For information, go to **www.buddhify.com**.

There are also online mental health services for treating panic and phobia, such as FearFighter, which is an online cognitive behavioural therapy-based self-help course available on the NHS in some areas. You can also pay for the course privately. See: **www.fearfighter.com**.

For those who live with a mental health problem that makes it difficult to socialise, peer-support groups can help enhance recovery as well as increasing an individual's social support networks. Peer support is the help and support that people with lived experience of a mental health problem are able to give to one another.[10]

Big White Wall is a supportive online community for people who struggle with their mental health. The service is available 24/7, and is completely anonymous and guided by trained professionals. Big White Wall is available for free in many areas across the UK through the NHS, employers and some universities. It's free to all UK-serving personnel, veterans and their families. For more information, please see: **www.bigwhitewall.com**.

Watch out for harmful relationships

On the whole, relationships are good for us and, for most of us, are central to living a good life, but that's not true of all relationships. From the evidence outlined in the sections on intimate partner violence/domestic violence and bullying in our MHAW Relationships Report, sometimes relationships in our lives can be harmful – for example, when they are characterised by bullying or abuse. It's important to remember that harmful relationships are not just limited to our romantic partnerships; a person can have a damaging relationship with a friend, co-worker or even a family member.

Although domestic violence is more common among women, men can also experience it and can be exposed to the same range of potentially negative relationships. These toxic relationships are defined by an unhealthy dynamic that two people are participating in.[11]

Here are some signs to look out for when assessing whether you are in a toxic or harmful relationship:

- You don't feel good enough. You feel like nothing you do is quite right and are constantly trying to prove your worth. You constantly seek the other person's validation.

- You can't be yourself. You feel you have to walk on eggshells and monitor everything you say and do. You feel you need to think twice before you speak as certain topics are off limits, and you feel you have to act or behave a certain way. You're afraid to bring things up because you're not sure how the other person will react.

- The other person puts you down.

- You feel like the problem. The other person doesn't take responsibility for their actions and instead blames you. They attribute any problems or difficulties in the relationship as all your fault.

- You start to withdraw from participating in activities or seeing people in your life.

If you are worried about a harmful relationship, domestic violence or intimate partner violence, you can contact:

The Freephone 24-hour National Domestic Violence Helpline (women only) on **0808 2000 247**.

Men's Advice Line on **0808 801 0327,** or you can email them or chat online with an advisor.
See: **www.mensadviceline.org.uk**

Some negative relationships can be repaired, but both people in the relationship need to be committed to working on it. If you are in a toxic relationship and you both agree to work to change this dynamic, there are a number of self-help resources available.

However, it may also be useful to seek additional support from a professional to help work through a dysfunctional, harmful relationship pattern. Seeing a therapist, either as a couple or individually, who specialises in working with interpersonal issues can help you both find ways of working through any difficulties.

For more information on relationship counselling, please see Relate's website: **www.relate.org.uk**

1.   Wesson, D. (2014). *15 Traits of a Healthy Relationship*. [online] Wespsych.com. Available at: http://wespsych.com/15-traits-of-a-healthy-relationship/ [Accessed 2 Mar. 2016].

2.   Dr. Kenneth Shore. (2016). *Helping the Socially Isolated Child* - Dr. Kenneth Shore. [online] Available at: http://drkennethshore.nprinc.com/for-teachers/helping-socially-isolated-child/ [Accessed 11 Mar. 2016].

3.   Royal College of Psychiatrists, '*Mental Health of Students in Higher Education*', 2011.

4.   Thomas, L. Building, '*Student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change*': final report from the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme, 2011

5.   Student Minds. (2014). *Look After Your Mate*. [online] Available at: http://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/interactive_laym_guide.pdf [11 Mar 2016]

6.   Community Tool Box. (2015). *Building and Sustaining Relationships | Main Section | Community Tool Box*. [online] Available at: http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/leadership-functions/build-sustain-relationships/main [Accessed 11 Mar. 2016].

7.   Stiglitz, J., Sen, A., Fitoussi, J-P. (2009). *Commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress*.

8.   Fife Community Safety Partnership. (2016). SafetyNet. [online]] Available at: http://www.fifedirect.org.uk/topics/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.display&p2sid=E0274253-9207-9650-B7D72F15836335 10&themeid=98A56687-9A34-4494-A43C-68E07CCAE64E [Accessed 11 Mar 2016]

9.   Strong, S. (2015). *Wise Guide: Healthy, happy, and connected*. London: Independent Age.

10.   Mental Health Foundation. (2016). *Peer Support*. [online] Available at: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/peer-support [Accessed 13 Mar 2016]

11.   Walters, D. (2015). *Toxic Relationships: How to Identify an Unhealthy Relationship and Take Action to Repair It or Free Yourself – (How to Get Out of a Toxic Relationship)*. 1st ed. (E-book)

Mental Health Foundation

mentalhealth.org.uk

Read our report Relationships in the 21st century here:
mentalhealth.org.uk/relationships

mentalhealthfoundation

@mentalhealth

@mentalhealthfoundation

Mental Health Foundation
First Floor, Colechurch House
1 London Bridge Walk
London SE1 2SX

Telephone: 020 7803 1121
Email: supporter@mentalhealth.org.uk