

Signs of an unhealthy relationship dynamic



GENDER MINORITIES AOTEAROA

Irawhiti Takatāpui, Transgender, & Intersex NZ



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Sometimes our relationships have dynamics which are unhealthy, harmful, or even abusive.

This booklet talks about signs that something may not be working, identifying unhealthy dynamics in a relationship, and dealing with common scenarios for trans people.

It touches on working through some issues, or leaving a relationship which may be difficult or dangerous to leave.

There are also links to some of our other resources, including resources to help you talk through problems and change behaviors, and resources to help you safely leave a dangerous situation.

Signs of unhealthy dynamics

Physical safety

- Pulling your hair, grabbing, pushing, restraining, kicking, pinching, choking, or hurting you in any way.
- Shouting at you, calling you names, breaking things, making you feel afraid for your safety.
- Preventing you from leaving – for example blocking the doorway, taking your keys.

Psychological, emotional, and spiritual safety

- Treating you differently because they are upset, but refusing to tell you why.
- Overwriting your emotions or perceptions: convincing you that you feel the way they want you to feel, or that you want what they want, or that you agree with their version of events.
- Saying cryptic things to keep you guessing what they mean and feeling uncertain.
- Insisting that you trust them completely regardless of whether they have earned that trust or repeatedly broken your trust.
- Refusing to let you talk about your emotions when you need to.
- Insisting that you must always talk about your emotions when they want you to.



- Taking their moods out on you – it is OK to have big emotions but we can choose how we express them.
- Blaming you for all the problems in the relationship.
- Telling you not to speak to anyone about your relationship, or becoming angry when you do.
- Telling you that you're hard to love, bad at life, or not a valuable person.
- Invalidating your lived experience, including denying gender based discrimination against you, systems which disadvantage you, and social dynamics which harm you.
- Undermining or disrespecting your culture, refusing to acknowledge important cultural practices, laughing at your religion, culture, or language, saying their culture is more normal or better than yours. Making you feel ashamed or bad about your culture, or removing your access to your culture and your people.

Sexual safety

- Attempting to be sexual with you when you are angry at them, trying to avoid talking about your feelings by distracting you with sex, or minimising your anger by saying they feel sexual towards you when you're angry.
- Attempting to be sexual with you when you're sad, upset, or triggered (experiencing associations or flashbacks to traumatic events).
- Forcing or pressuring you to be sexual in any way, hurting, humiliating, or otherwise harming you during sex (without your consent).

General control

- Extreme jealousy or possessiveness.
- Constant accusations of flirting or cheating.
- Sulking, avoiding, and passive aggressive tactics.
- Saying that you look “too sexy”, or getting angry at you when other people look at you.
- Telling you the clothes/hair/makeup you choose look bad and pressuring you to look a certain way.
- Using your insecurities about your body or gender presentation to make you feel less confident and more reliant on them.
- Excessive demands to tell them where you are, what you're doing, or how you're feeling.
- Telling you to stay away from your friends or getting upset when you spend time with your friends or family.
- Making you stay up all night when you need sleep – whether it's to talk, to have sex, to party, or for any reason.
- Criticizing or controlling your food and eating habits.
- Taking photographs or film footage of you against your wishes, or using your image in ways you didn't agree to – for example posting your nude photographs on social media.



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Making you responsible for them

- Insisting that it's you who takes care of them whenever they need support.
- Accusing you of abandoning them whenever you leave them alone.
- Saying they will hurt themselves because of you or if you don't do what they want.
- Blaming you for their bad behavior – "look at what you made me do" and "I wouldn't have had to do X if you hadn't done Y".



Controlling, disrespecting, or harming a partner are signs of unhealthy relationship dynamics.

You can find resources to help make a relationship healthier on our website, genderminorities.com

Common scenarios for trans people

My partner wants to keep our relationship a secret

Many cisgender people who have attractions to transgender people are in denial about their attractions. They may be upset with their partner or with themselves for their attraction. They may not want people to know about their attraction or their relationship.

It is important to remember that there is nothing shameful about love, that we are normal people, and that we deserve the same care and attention as any other partner.

If your partner respects you as a person, they should be willing to stand up against transmisogyny, transphobia, and other prejudices, and to support you 100%.

Accepting you and loving you will mean that they also have to work on themselves – if they have any shame about dating you they will need to work through it and understand that there is nothing wrong with loving you, and nothing to be ashamed about. That way they can stand up against others who put them or you down.



If I have genital surgery my partner will leave – they're just not into vaginas/penises

While some people have strong feelings about the genitals of their partners, this type of thinking reduces our attractions to being exclusively about genitals.

If your partner loves you for more than just your genitals, they should support you to decide what is best for yourself, even if it will take some getting used to for them. No one will be more affected by the decision to have or not have surgeries than you will.

Your partner should listen to you when you need to talk about the possibilities and not try to influence your decision either way. They should respect that it is your body and your choice, and should not pressure you or threaten to leave you if you're thinking about changing your genitals.

My partner doesn't like me talking about problems in our relationship to other people

If someone is being controlling in a relationship, it's common for them to tell their partner not to talk with anyone else about problems in the relationship.

Often they are afraid that others will disapprove of their behaviors, or advise you to leave the relationship. They might say your friends will be judgemental, or interfering, or they might say it's their own personal business and it would be disrespectful for you to talk with anyone else about it.

Talking is so important; it can help you work out what you need, and what you want to do next.

If your partner cares about you, they should be happy for you to talk about relationship problems, and work out how to fix or change the things that make you unhappy.

Talking doesn't mean that you have to leave the relationship.

There are some people who have a legal obligation to share certain kinds of information if they think a person is in danger – these people may include a counselor or teacher, so ask if this is the case and find out what kinds of things they would be required to share. It is always OK to say 'I'm not ready to talk about that with you yet'.



My partner gets really upset and then we have to talk for hours until they're happy with the outcome. I end up going along with them just to end the fight

Talking can be important and healthy, but if you are cornered in a room and you can't leave that's not OK. If you're being kept up all night when you need to sleep that's not OK. If your partner forces you to talk when you can't that's not OK.

In some situations it can help to say that you care but you can't talk right now. Give a concrete time when you will sit down and talk with them and an amount of time you can agree on for the conversation.

"Jay, I love you and I totally care about this, but right now I need to sleep. We can give this proper attention tomorrow. I will come over after work at 5pm and we'll sit down and talk about it until 7pm."

Sometimes it may help to show that you intend to still be in their life at the end of the conversation too, even if the issue can't be sorted immediately.

"After we talk maybe we can have dinner together if we feel like it? Then I'm going to have to leave about 8pm so I can get things ready for work the next day, and sleep at my place. We can make another time for more talks too if we don't work it all out tomorrow"

If your partner is preventing you from leaving, you may be able to say you need to use the bathroom, and then call a friend or the police from your mobile phone. You may have to pretend to agree to your partner's demands so you can leave and get to somewhere safe before you seek support.

I'm afraid my partner will hurt me when they find out I'm leaving

It is very common that abusive behaviors will intensify and escalate as you prepare to leave a relationship and your partner has less control over you. Leaving is the most dangerous time for someone in an abusive relationship.

Physical and sexual violence, kidnapping children, destruction of important documents, property damage, and counter claims of abuse are common at this point. These fears are very real.

We recommend that you build your support systems, make safety plans, and potentially seek legal protections.

Counter claims: I'm a trans woman, and I'm afraid that my cis woman or transmasculine partner might cut off my support by saying I abused her/them

When you start to speak out against abuse by your partner, it is common for your partner to make a counter accusation that the abuse happened the other way around.

Counter accusations are often an attempt to influence mutual friends, to limit the support being offered to you, and to allow the accused partner to maintain control over your life in some way, even after the relationship has ended.

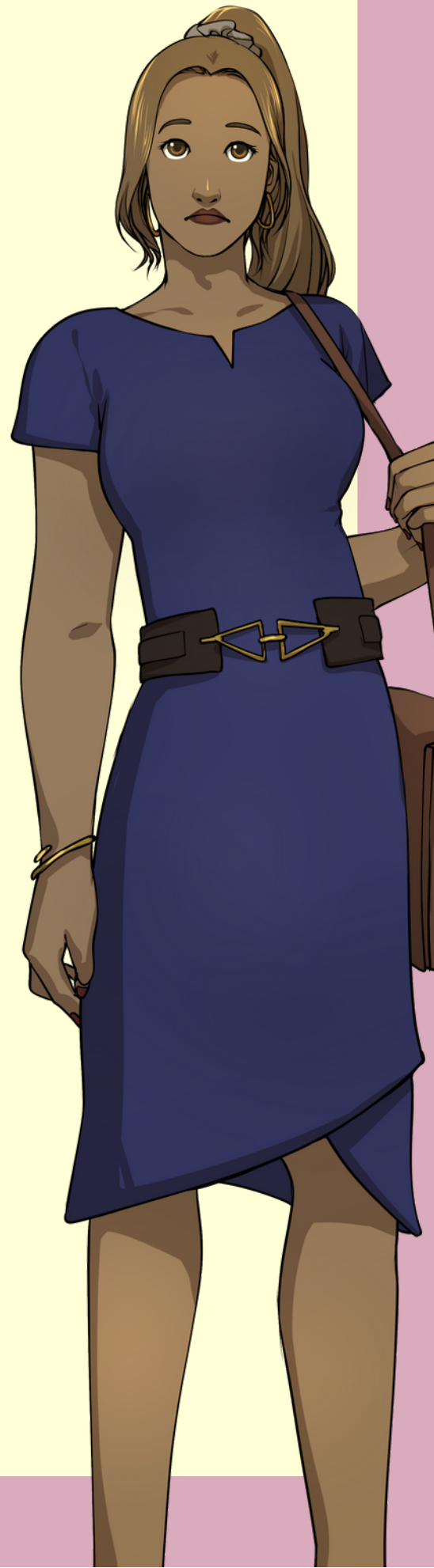
Sometimes, if your partner has experienced abuse in the past, this can also be a way of maintaining their identity as a victim or survivor of abuse, as some people believe that a person who has been a victim or survivor of abuse is not capable of abusing others.

Because of transmisogyny, trans women are often in a double bind – being treated with misogyny as women, but also being considered to embody the worst of male violence. If they are counter accused of abuse they can be in an extremely difficult situation with very little support, particularly if the person counter-accusing them is a cisgender woman or a transmasculine person (who was assigned “female” at birth).

Patriarchal societies support men who counter accuse any woman (“she’s crazy /a control freak”). Some women’s support groups and agencies discriminate against trans women, or hold transmisogynist views which may privilege support for those assigned “female” at birth (“she’s *really* a man/male brain/socialised male”, “penis = patriarchy/rape”, or other transmisogynist arguments that frame trans women as being men).

Many friendship, school, and social groups, as well as rainbow, queer, and feminist communities, are all too ready to believe that trans women are secretly violent predators, despite evidence to the contrary.

Keep a record – gather any evidence of your partner abusing you, and have a support crew who can help you through this. See the section below on preparing to leave.



I don't think I can find someone better who will love me

Society is full of negative messages about trans people, and at times it can be very difficult not to believe these about ourselves in some way.

The truth is, each of us is unique, and beautiful, and lovable. We all deserve healthy relationships with people who respect us. Sometimes it takes a long time, and many relationships which don't work out, before we figure out how to have healthy relationships – even with ourselves.

Consider the advice you would give to a friend – you don't deserve abuse, you deserve respect, kindness, and love. You are awesome, and along life's journeys you will meet people who recognise that too.

My partner is heterosexual, gay, or a lesbian, they won't be attracted to me if I start to transition

For people who identify as exclusively attracted to one gender, sometimes it can be especially difficult to accept that their partner is a different gender than they first thought.

This can be especially challenging if your partner's gender and sexual orientation are one identity (for example 'lesbian' implies their gender as a woman as well as their attraction toward women).

It can be important that they realise that your gender hasn't suddenly changed – even if you have recently come out about your true gender, chances are you have felt that way for a long time. Transitioning doesn't mean they suddenly love someone of a different gender – you may have been trans the whole time, even if you didn't always know it or you weren't always talking about it.

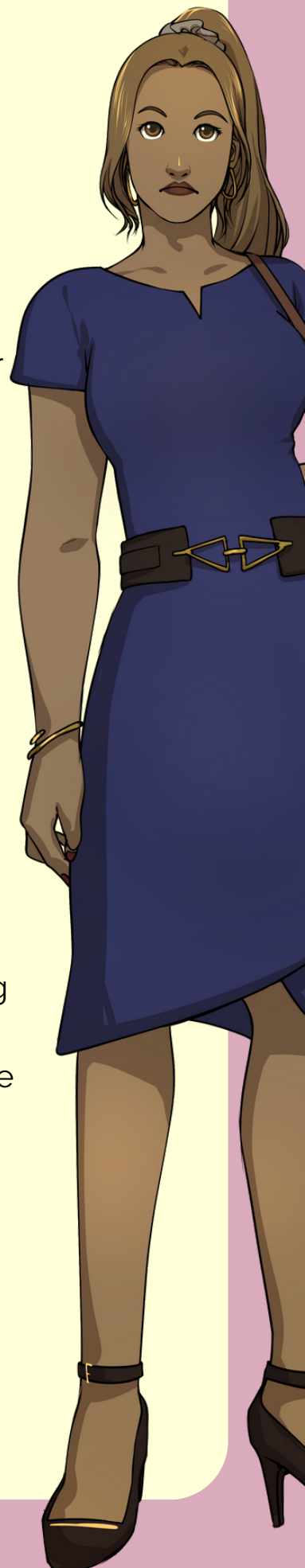
If they are worried, it may help for them to talk with other partners of trans people, or to read things written by the partners of trans people as well as by trans people themselves.

It is not OK for your partner to:

- a) accuse you of tricking them into sleeping with someone of the 'wrong' gender for them.
- b) take, hide, or dispose of your hormones, makeup, binder, or other transition aides.
- c) undermine your decision to transition.

Sometimes, especially in the case of medical transition, we do change in ways that are incompatible with existing relationships. Changing hormones can change the way we smell, how sensitive our skin is, how interested we are in being sexual, we may feel different, the ways that we like to be intimate may change, we may start to want different things in our lives.

It is not abusive to admit that one is no longer sexually attracted to their partner, but it is important that you can both talk about your feelings respectfully and in caring and constructive ways.



Society stigmatises me and stereotypes me as 'probably not a suitable parent'. If I leave my partner, I'm afraid I'll lose my children.

Many transgender parents hold deep fears that their children will be taken from them by the courts. This is especially so for trans folks who are poor, those on social welfare, Māori, Pasefika, and other people of colour, migrants, refugees, people who use drugs, people living with HIV, disabled people, people who are living in substandard housing, sex workers, people who are neurodiverse or who have mental health or developmental conditions, and people who have a criminal record or a history with the justice system.

Generally speaking, the courts prefer to leave children with their parent rather than placing them in state care, so long as the children are in a violence-free, safe, and secure home, they are warm, fed, clothed, and attending school if they are school age. These will also be factors in shared-care situations, as most family courts will prefer that both parents are involved. It can be more complicated for parents who aren't legal guardians – you can get more info on this in the links below.

Without a doubt there are huge amounts of stigma and discrimination against marginalised people, but when it comes to caring for children it is in the interest of the state to leave them at home if it is safe to do so.

If the other parent may try to stop you spending time with your children, you can seek legal advice. Community Law have a fantastic guide to child custody, *The Community Law Manual*, and can offer you free advice.

Difficult decisions

If you're experiencing unhealthy or abusive relationship dynamics, and your partner is not prepared to change or if you need to get out, some things you might want to think about include support systems, safety plans, and potentially legal protections.

It is always important to remember that we have choices in how we behave, and that we have a responsibility to recognise and change our own abusive behaviors. No matter what past experiences a person has been through, they can still choose to not abuse you, and you do not have to stay in a relationship which is not working for you.

My relationship is unhealthy but I want to stay with my partner

You may feel pressured by your partner, friends, family, or others to stay in the relationship and 'get on with it', or to 'hurry up and leave already'. Ultimately the decision to stay or leave must be your own.

An unhealthy relationship can sometimes improve with time and effort from everyone. It is important to recognise that you can only change your own behavior, and only your partner can change theirs, so it is essential that you both recognise what is unhealthy in your relationship and make a commitment to changing your own behaviors.

Discussing the above relationship pointers, or some of our other relationship resources with your partner might be a good place to start.

Some people find that using active listening can help to clarify situations and facilitate understanding each other's perspective.

You could also seek support from friends, family, and whānau, relationship counseling, or elsewhere. This can be especially difficult for those whose relationships are less conventional or more stigmatised (such as open relationships), as there are often no examples or blueprints on how to have healthy relationships or deal with unhealthy things which may be happening. There are resources linked below.

With time and work, many relationships can improve and become healthy and happy. Other times, people reach a point where they know that they are not happy in the relationship, or are happier when their partner isn't around. If you decide to leave, there is advice below for safely leaving a scary or abusive situation.

My relationship is unhealthy and I'm over it: preparing to leave

If you are leaving a healthy relationship, it's likely you can have a good conversation and talk about how you are feeling and why you want to end the relationship. Breakups are still hard, but people who are in a healthy relationship can usually also have a healthy mutual breakup.

However, if the relationship is unhealthy or abusive, it may be very difficult to end it amicably. Your partner may not accept that you want to end the relationship: they may try to make you feel guilty, afraid to leave, or worried that they will not cope. They may even threaten to hurt you, your loved ones, or themselves. Even if they do not accept that the relationship is ending, you do not have to stay in the relationship.

It can help to keep the conversation direct, factual, non blaming, and future focused – telling them you are unhappy, you no longer want to be in this relationship, and that you are leaving. They may want to argue specific reasons or examples of them behaving badly, convince you that you were the one who behaved badly, or promise they will change. These are tactics to control you and stop you leaving. You do not need to be drawn into this. You can leave whenever you are ready.

Getting support

There are many organisations that can help with sexual violence, leaving abusive situations, and staying safe.

You can find some of these on the TOAH-NNEST national database (toah-nnest.org.nz/find-help), and there are others listed in the online version of this resource, available from genderminorities.com.





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