

MENTAL HEALTH AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Romantic Relationship Health Belongs in the Mental Health Conversation

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THE BOTTOM LINE

Romantic relationships are one of the primary contributors of youth mental health. High-quality, nonviolent relationships buffer stress and build resilience; unhealthy or violent relationships sharply raise the risk of depression, suicidality, PTSD, and substance use. Investing in youth mental health requires educating youth about healthy relationships — not just clinics and crisis services.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT

- Romantic relationships are a normative part of adolescent development, not a distraction from it.
- **~70% of adolescents have had a romantic relationship by age 18 (National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health).**
- Moderate-length, higher-quality adolescent relationships are linked to better romantic relationships in adulthood (Madsen & Collins, 2011).

WHEN RELATIONSHIPS ARE HEALTHY

High-quality adolescent relationships are associated with:

- Lower rates of depression and anxiety in adolescents and emerging adults
- Higher self-esteem, self-confidence, and social competence
- Stress buffering — supported teens show significantly less impact from daily stressors
- Better academic functioning and reduced problem behavior

WHEN RELATIONSHIPS ARE UNHEALTHY

Low-quality relationships are associated with:

- Depressive and anxiety symptoms in both males and females
- Externalizing behaviors: aggression, delinquency, substance use, and **recidivism among adults** with a criminal record
- Lower academic performance and poorer job competence in young adults
- **Suicidal ideation and self-harm, particularly following breakups**

RELATIONSHIP TRANSITIONS / PROGRESSION AS STRESSORS

- Understanding why and how a **breakup** occurred improves future mental health and relationship outcomes.
- Outcomes include reduced depressive symptoms and increased relationship competence in subsequent relationships.
- **This understanding does not happen automatically — it can and should be taught.**

IN SUM — RELATIONSHIPS DO INFLUENCE MENTAL HEALTH

Healthy relationships:

- Buffer daily stressors
- Reduce suicidality
- Contribute to identity development
- Protect against delinquent and criminal behavior
- Provide physical health benefits, especially in adulthood

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