

A SHOWTIME DOCUMENTARY FILM



# CUSP



ENGAGEMENT GUIDE

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### CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL - DATING MATTERS®

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# 1

# INTERSECTIONAL RESOURCES & SUPPORT

**DO YOU NEED HELP?  
YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

**NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT HOTLINE.** Free. Confidential 800.656.HOPE or chat online with a trained staff member who can provide you confidential crisis support.

Chat English [online.rainn.org](https://online.rainn.org)

Chat Español [rainn.org/es](https://rainn.org/es)

**LOVE IS RESPECT TEEN DATING VIOLENCE HOTLINE**  
1-866-331-9474 800.787.3224 (TTY) Offers 24/7 information, support, and advocacy to young people between the ages of 13 and 26 who have questions or concerns about their romantic relationships.

Text 'LOVEIS' to 22522

[Chat Live Now](#)

**STRONGHEARTS NATIVE HELPLINE** 844.7NATIVE (762.8483) or [Chat Live Now](#) Free, confidential, and culturally-relevant support for Native American and Alaska Native teens and young adults experiencing dating abuse and sexual violence is available every day from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. CST

**(LGBTQ+) YOUTH CRISIS INTERVENTION AND SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINE** 866.488.7386 The Trevor Project has trained counselors who understand the challenges LGBTQ young people face. They will listen without judgment. All of your conversations are confidential, and you can share as much or as little as you'd like.

Text "START" to 678-678

[Chat with a counselor](#)



## ABOUT THE FILM

During a road trip across America, first-time filmmakers Parker Hill and Isabel Bethencourt meet three spirited teenage girls – Brittney, Aaloni and Autumn – at a gas station in small-town Texas and are inspired to document their carefree summers. This crew of two with only a camera, microphone and a \$10 flashlight for lighting soon discovers a much different story. As they film the teens' activities from bonfire parties to bedroom hangouts, discussions around sex, trauma, agency and consent unfold with candor.

Shot verité style, the documentary captures intimate moments of female bonding and gives a candid look at the dark realities that young women face today. In **CUSP**, Hill and Bethencourt reveal a true-to-life coming-of-age tale and provide an unfiltered snapshot of teenage life in America.



# HOW TO USE THIS ENGAGEMENT GUIDE

This guide was created to support viewers of **CUSP**, as well as young people and their friends, parents, educators to engage in critical reflection around themes of teen dating—including sex, trauma, agency and consent—that surface in the film. The guide unfolds in three sections:

1. **INTERSECTIONAL SUPPORT AND RESOURCES** frames the context of the film, offers discussion prompts to help process the viewing experience, and, most importantly, presents immediate resources for viewers who realize they are in an emergency situation themselves.
2. **UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES** educates readers with basic information and tools to further grasp the spectrum of relationship abuse and sexual violence, determine the differences between a healthy and unhealthy relationship, and demystify the concept of consent.
3. **REFLECTIVE ACTIVITIES** provide an opportunity to guide viewers in assessing the health of the relationships in their own lives, and developing the tools to create healthy relationships for both themselves, and in community.



## TRIGGER WARNING

*This film includes content on teen dating and domestic violence and its impact on children, teens and adults—issues that may not be suitable for all audiences. Facilitators and educators are strongly encouraged to review all of the readings, materials, and links and to preview the film content to be sure the topic and activities are appropriate for their audiences. At the facilitator's or educator's discretion, a trigger warning or other preparation/discussion may be advisable, in addition to identifying viewers who might be personally or adversely affected by this material. Additional resources for the film are included at the end of this discussion guide, including organizations and hotlines offering services to those who may need additional support.*

Thank you for watching **CUSP** and reading our guide! We made this film to start conversations between teens, their families, and communities, and encourage all girls and young people to know that their voices and their experiences matter. If you have been through these same situations, from sexual assault, controlling relationships, non-consensual acts, or abuse, know you are not alone. There are many resources and people to talk to about what you've been through, a few of which are listed in this guide.

The protection and privacy of the characters we filmed is incredibly important to us, and we do not share these stories lightly. The process of making this documentary evolved as we filmed, and our understanding and approach was constantly changing. This is the story of how **CUSP** began, and how our intent grew.

A couple summers ago, on the last night of a four-day road trip from Montana to Texas, we pulled into a gas station in the middle of nowhere at 2:30 AM. A pickup truck pulls in next to us, slamming to a stop with music blasting. Three girls spill out, running around barefoot and exuberant with reckless youthful abandon. Immediately, we were awestruck by their magnetic energy, so we introduced ourselves, chatted, and asked to take their photo. They invited us to their friends house, and we followed them down a country road – in the middle of nowhere – for a late-night summer swim in the river. As the sun came up, we had talked so much to Aaloni, Autumn and Brittney about their lives, and were completely sucked into their electric summer spirit and freedom – seemingly without a care in the world: no curfew; just hanging out until sunrise.

Our interest was sparked on that first night, and we were inspired to capture this crazy, fever-dream part of youth and share it with others, particularly from a young woman's perspective. At the time, we weren't explicitly looking to make a film, although **CUSP** would become our first-ever feature film. But as we both were drawn to coming-of-age stories about friendship and freedom, we set out to document these teens, with their permission.

We planned to make a short doc, and filmed for 10 days that summer, verité style, to immerse ourselves – and ultimately the viewers – in their world, capturing everything from midday walks to McDonalds, to bonfire parties until sunrise. A big shift emerged when we got home and watched the footage, one which the teens already clearly understood: this story of wild teenage freedom was laced with toxic and pervasive social norms. Candid discussions surfaced about sex, trauma, toxic masculinity, consent and agency – or the lack thereof. We witnessed behavior change in real time, as the girls often dismissed their feelings, shrugging off heavy topics as being unimportant. We shifted the project into a feature film that delves into these issues – a film that would embrace and validate female stories, and highlight the deep, unconditional female friendships that supported them through hardship. As the girls expressed themselves, many for the first time, people wanted to hear what they had to say.

While **CUSP** is very much Aaloni, Autumn and Brittney's intimate story of finding their voices while grappling with the often-traumatic realities of female adolescence, it's also a universal one; most of us have struggled with that confusing time between childhood and adulthood, and we all can relate to our own teenage experiences and how it played a pivotal, undeniable role in shaping the adults we have become.

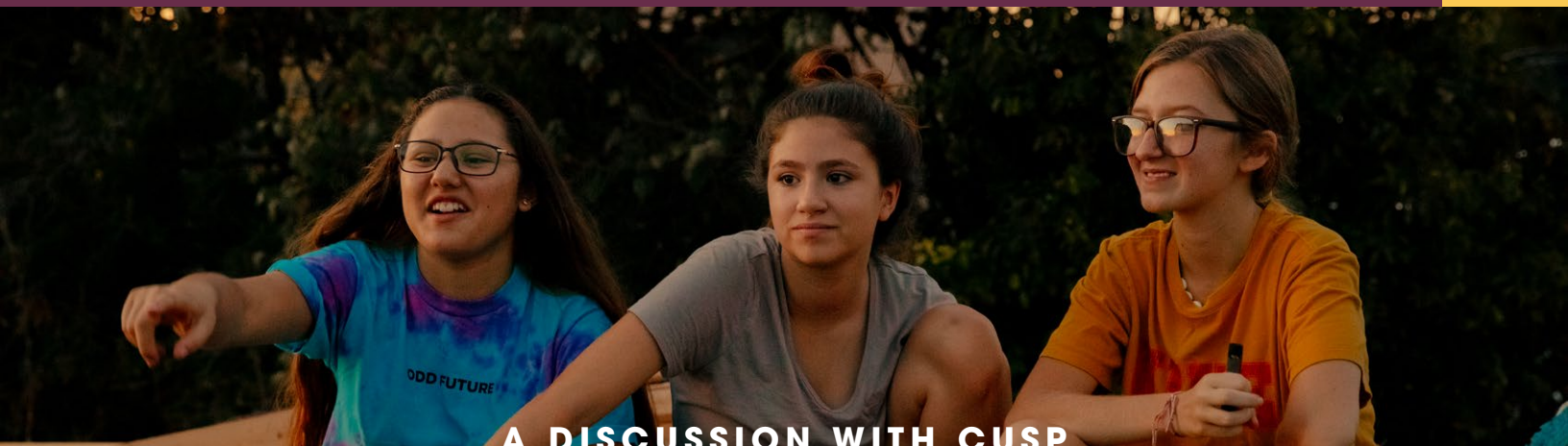
We hope that the familiarity of this film encourages reflection and frank conversation amongst our friends, families, communities and perhaps, most importantly, ourselves. We hope viewers of all ages will develop a stronger appreciation for the incredible strength these girls exhibited through their vulnerability, candidly sharing their stories with the world – revealing the reality of what it's like to be a girl today.

#### PARKER HILL & ISABEL BETHENCOURT



## A NOTE FROM THE FILMMAKERS





## A DISCUSSION WITH CUSP

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions to unpack and process various scenes in the film, and to understand what you just watched in **CUSP**, and your own reaction to it. These questions can be used in conversation between friends, parents and teens, in classrooms or training contexts, but they also work just as well for writing in your own journal.

1. Across the film, we hear many messages about romantic relationships from the three main characters, Autumn, Aaloni and Brittney— as well as from the girl's friends, boyfriends and parents. What are some of the messages you heard, either through direct statements in the film's dialogue or through observing actions of the characters? Do you agree or disagree with these messages, and why or why not?
2. Throughout the film, details of relationships that range from controlling to abusive to full on sexual assault and rape are discussed often in casual contexts—the experience, in one way or another, seems to have touched everyone in the community to the point of normalcy. Do you relate to these conversations? Where do you think this normalization of abuse comes from?
3. Often abuse can occur in cycles between generations, meaning, children can experience a version of what their parents experienced or perpetrated, and so on. In the film **CUSP**, we are offered a glimpse of the girl's parent's backstories. Are there patterns that repeat between the generations? What do you think it would take to break the cycle of unhealthy relationships?
4. "Toxic masculinity" (sometimes called "harmful masculinity") is a popular cultural phrase used to describe the way society pressurizes men, boys and masculine-presenting people to "act tough" and use dominance and aggression to achieve their goals—often at the expense of female-identifying people. Did you see any symbols or expressions of toxic masculinity in the film? Look for objects, attitudes, expressions or stories shared. What symbols or expressions of toxic masculinity are familiar to you? What makes them "toxic?" Masculinity can be healthy, of course. What are ways you've seen it expressed in a healthy way?
5. What do you think makes a healthy relationship? Did you see examples of a healthy relationship in the film? If so, where? If not, why not? Can you identify a few red flags that might point to abuse or controlling relationships in the film?
6. "Confidence will take you far," Autumn says in **CUSP**. What does she mean by that? When do you see the girls feel empowered in the film? Do you feel empowered to speak your truth, set boundaries and/or say no? Why or why not? What would you need to become a more empowered person? What conditions keep a person from feeling empowered? Do you see these conditions in the film?
7. In the film, the girls seem to feel most at ease in the presence of other young women. What are the signs of trust we see between Aaloni, Autumn and Brittney? What do you think makes a strong friendship? Do you feel safe with your friends? How can friends help each other in having healthy relationships? How would you respond to seeing one of your friends in a controlling or abusive relationship? What would you say if a friend came to you for help?
8. Do you feel you have enough information to address the topic of healthy relationships in your own life? If not, you can follow this guide for resources, information and activities that will support your learning journey. If you do feel equipped, a refresher can't hurt—and also, does someone else in your life need this?

# A NOTE TO BOYS & MEN

Though the film **CUSP** focuses on the experience of young women, men and boys also can be victims of abuse or hooked into unhealthy relationship patterns. It is important to know that these resources apply to you, as well.

This guide can also be the start of educating yourself and others about how to prevent sexual assault, and how to respond to survivors.

*Help prevent sexual violence by promoting healthy relationships and modeling healthy boundaries:* Use your relationships to be helpful. For example, if someone is pressuring another person to drink alcohol when that person doesn't want to, you can help reinforce that boundary by repeating that s/he doesn't want it and to stop. This can work for any situation in which a person is communicating "no" verbally or non-verbally, but the behavior is continuing.

*Use your relationships to honor victims/survivors.* For example, if a friend tells a joke about rape, choosing not to laugh can communicate that jokes about rape are not ok with you.

*Show respect within your relationships by avoiding the habit of interrupting and listening attentively.* This is a tiny but important relationship skill that honors boundaries.

*Respond in a helpful way when someone tells you that they have been sexually violated.* It is likely that you know someone who has been sexually assaulted. The first person a victim/survivor tells has a profound impact on if that person begins the process of healing or is further hurt by having told.

Things you can do:

- *Listen without judging or interrupting.* Tell them it wasn't their fault. No one has the right to abuse. Tell them you believe them. Ask how you can be helpful. Refer them to a local rape crisis agency for counseling and services.
- *Use social media to promote healthy behaviors in relationships, and prevent sexual violence.* Share information that identifies healthy versus unhealthy behavior and reflects the realities victim/survivors face.
- *Donate your time and/or money.* Join a group that is dedicated to preventing sexual violence, such as Men Against Violence or A Call To Men. Volunteer at a local rape crisis center. Donate to your local rape crisis center.
- *Keep learning.* [Five Questions for Men Who Want to Be Better Allies](#) and more educational resources from [A Call To Men](#).





# 2

## UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

In the film **CUSP**, main characters Brittany, Autumn and Aaloni grapple with histories of abuse and violence in their family and dating lives. The impact of these experiences show up in various ways across the film, in both the teens and the adults, through substance abuse, normalization of abusive scenarios, cycles of violence in the home and loss of hope. In order to intervene in an unhealthy relationship, or to build

a healthy relationship, understanding the issue of dating, consent and sexual assault is a critical foundation. Use the following section to educate yourself on dating health, and the different forms of sexual assault before moving onto the exercises.





# THE RELATIONSHIP SPECTRUM

Dating means different things to different people, especially across generations. Love Is Respect defines dating as two or more people in an intimate relationship. The relationship may be sexual (though it doesn't have to be), it could be serious or casual, gay or straight, monogamous or open, or short-term or long-term. In this guide, we use the gender-neutral term “partners” to refer to people in intimate relationships, but you might use a different term for your relationship depending on your situation. No matter how you define it, it's important to make sure you're on the same page with your partner in setting the definitions and boundaries of your relationship. This engagement guide will help provide a place to start.

## *Healthy Relationships Look Like:*

When both partners are:

- Communicating
- Respectful
- Trusting
- Honest
- Equal
- Enjoying personal time away from each other
- Making mutual choices
- Economic/financial partners

## *Unhealthy Relationships Look Like:*

When one partner is:

- Not communicating
- Disrespectful
- Not trusting
- Dishonest
- Trying to take control
- Only spending time together
- Pressured into activities
- Unequal economically

## *Abusive Relationships Might Look Like:*

When one partner is:

- Communicating in a hurtful or threatening way
- Mistreating
- Accusing the other of cheating when it's untrue
- Denying their actions are abusive
- Controlling
- Isolating their partner from others



# THE SEXUAL VIOLENCE CONTINUUM

Sexual assault is not just an exclusive act of aggression but should be considered as part of a continuum of attitudes, beliefs, and actions that support a culture of sexual violence. It's important to understand that sexual violence is an outgrowth of the larger issue of sexism and gender inequity. In order to have an impact on sexual violence, a community must take steps that address precursors as they relate to the larger issue.

## WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

Sexual Violence is any unwanted, forced, tricked or coerced sexual activity.

There are many different forms of sexual violence, such as rape, incest, date/acquaintance rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual touching, voyeurism, and many others.

## ROOTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

There are many beliefs about why sexual violence occurs in our society. It is often seen as a criminal justice problem, a public health or a social problem. It is all three and most of all it is a community problem.

The issue of why sexual violence occurs is very complicated. Yet it is clear that it occurs as a continuum of beliefs and actions. And at the base of the continuum are individual beliefs and social norms which allow sexual violence to occur.

The sexual violence continuum is an attempt to explain how our norms and beliefs allow for an environment where sexual violence can occur.

## DEATH

### RAPE

Many survivors of sexual violence are orally, vaginally, or anally penetrated. This type of sexual violence may or may not include other types of physical violence.

### SEXUAL ASSAULT/ABUSE

Often sexual assault survivors are not penetrated but are forced to engage in sexual acts. They may also be forced to watch others do so or watch pornography.

### SEXUAL HARASSMENT

This type of sexual violence is a pattern of unwanted or uninvited sexual attention that is aimed at coercing someone to do or act in a way the harasser wants. This may include verbal and/or physical acts.

### UNWANTED SEXUAL TOUCH

This type of sexual violence is blatant or implicated touching in a sexual manner. This may include: fondling, grabbing of sexual body parts, and forced or coerced kissing.

### INVASION OF SPACE

This type of sexual violence is perpetrated by violating a person's sense of safety in a sexual context. This may include jokes, catcalls, obscene phone calls, leering at a sexual body part, "accidentally" rubbing up against someone, and voyeurism.

### INDIVIDUAL BELIEF SYSTEM THAT JUSTIFIES AGGRESSION

This is the way people think about sexual norms and gender roles. This may include beliefs such as the notion that if one buys the other dinner the other person "owes" them sex, or the belief that only men can initiate sexual activity.

### SOCIAL NORMS OF ENTITLEMENT

Social norms are accepted behaviors, attitudes and beliefs that create an environment in which all individuals are not treated equally. These norms allow a person or group to have power over another. Violence is an act of taking away someone's power and it can only occur when social norms allow power differences between people. Some social norms include: portraying women and children as sexual objects versus full human beings, believing in strict gender or racial stereotyping, believing that victims are responsible for their own victimization.

**CREDIT:** [HTTPS://WWW.ACESDV.ORG/WP-CONTENT/UPLOADS/2014/09/SEXUAL-VIOLENCE-CONTINUUM.PDF](https://www.acesdv.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/sexual-violence-continuum.pdf)

## TYPES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

To learn about categories of sexual violence, visit [RAINN.ORG/TYPES-SEXUAL-VIOLENCE](http://RAINN.ORG/TYPES-SEXUAL-VIOLENCE).



## UNDERSTANDING CONSENT

The following is adapted from [RAINN's website](#), a go-to resource to better understand consent and sexual violence.

When you're engaging in an intimate activity, consent is about communication—and it should happen every time. The laws about consent vary by state and situation, but you don't have to be a legal expert to understand how consent plays out in real life.

While the legal definitions of consent may vary by location and circumstance, the general concept is always the same: Consent is an ongoing process of discussing boundaries with which you or another are comfortable.

### *What is consent?*

Consent is an agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity. Consent should be clearly and freely communicated. A verbal and affirmative expression of consent can help both you and your partner to understand and respect each other's boundaries.

To learn more about consent and sexual violence visit [RAINN.ORG](#)

Consent cannot be given by individuals who are underage, intoxicated or incapacitated by drugs or alcohol, or asleep or unconscious. If someone agrees to an activity under pressure of intimidation or threat, that is not considered consent because it was not given freely. Unequal power dynamics, such as engaging in sexual activity with an employee or student, also mean that consent cannot be freely given.

### *How does consent work?*

When you're engaging in an intimate activity, consent is about communication. And it should happen every time for every type of activity. Consenting to one activity, one time, does not mean someone gives consent for other activities or for the same activity on other occasions. For example, agreeing to kiss someone doesn't give that person permission to remove your clothes. Having sex with someone in the past doesn't give that person permission to have sex with you again in the future. It's important to discuss boundaries and expectations with your partner prior to engaging in any sexual behavior.

### *You can change your mind at any time.*

You can withdraw consent at any point if you feel uncomfortable. One way to do this is to clearly communicate to your partner that you are no longer comfortable with this activity and wish to stop. Withdrawing consent can sometimes be challenging or difficult to do verbally, so non-verbal cues can also be used to convey this. The best way to ensure that all parties are comfortable with any sexual activity is to talk about it, check in periodically, and make sure everyone involved consents before escalating or changing activities.

### *What is enthusiastic consent?*

Enthusiastic consent is a newer model for understanding consent that focuses on a positive expression of consent. Simply put, enthusiastic consent means looking for the presence of a "yes" rather than the absence of a "no." Enthusiastic consent can be expressed verbally or through nonverbal cues, such as positive body language like smiling, maintaining eye contact, and nodding. These cues alone do not necessarily represent consent, but they are additional details that may reflect consent. It is necessary, however, to still seek verbal confirmation. The important part of consent, enthusiastic or otherwise, is checking in with your partner regularly to make sure that they are still on the same page.

Enthusiastic consent can look like this:

- Asking permission before you change the type or degree of sexual activity with phrases like "Is this OK?"



- Confirming that there is reciprocal interest before initiating any physical touch.
- Letting your partner know that you can stop at any time.
- Periodically checking in with your partner, such as asking “Is this still okay?”
- Providing positive feedback when you’re comfortable with an activity.
- Explicitly agreeing to certain activities, either by saying “yes” or another affirmative statement, like “I’m open to trying.”
- Using physical cues to let the other person know you’re comfortable taking things to the next level (see note below).
- Assuming that wearing certain clothes, flirting, or kissing is an invitation for anything more
- Someone being under the legal age of consent, as defined by the state
- Someone being incapacitated because of drugs or alcohol
- Pressuring someone into sexual activity by using fear or intimidation
- Assuming you have permission to engage in a sexual act because you’ve done it in the past

Important note: Physiological responses like an erection, lubrication, arousal, or orgasm are involuntary, meaning your body might react one way even when you are not consenting to the activity. Sometimes perpetrators will use the fact that these physiological responses occur to maintain secrecy or minimize a survivor’s experience by using phrases such as, “You know you liked it.” In no way does a physiological response mean that you or another consented to what happened. If you have been sexually abused or assaulted, it is not your fault.

Consent does NOT look like this:

- Refusing to acknowledge “no”
- A partner who is disengaged, nonresponsive, or visibly upset

The legal definitions for terms like rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse vary from state to state. See how each state legally defines these crimes by visiting [RAINN’s State Law Database](#). No matter what term you use, consent often plays an important role in determining whether an act is legally considered a crime.

Continue on to assess the health of your own relationship, or someone in your life, and engage tools to help develop your healthy relationship skills.



3

# REFLECTIVE ACTIVITIES





# IS MY RELATIONSHIP HEALTHY?

Take this quiz on behalf of yourself or a friend, to see how the relationship checks out.

## 1. WHEN I FIRST MEET A POTENTIAL DATING PARTNER, I KNOW THE PERSON LIKES ME WHEN:

- a. They tell me I'm perfect and praise me all the time.
- b. They want to take the relationship to the next level, already!
- c. They express jealousy over other people in my life—I'm a catch!
- d. They take me shopping for new clothes.
- e. They want my social media passwords—we should share everything!

**KEY:** If you selected any of the above, you might be looking at a relationship red flag. Each of these answers can be markers of control, which might open up a path of abuse over time. A relationship is at its healthiest when both members have a strong sense of autonomy, privacy and control over their own lives, the way they present, who they hang out with, and the pace at which a relationship unfolds.

While answers A and D are not necessarily causes for concern on their own, it is worth keeping your eyes open. Be careful of love bombing, an act of putting a partner on a pedestal to win their affections, only to use it against them later in the relationship.

Does your partner have unrealistic expectations of you, or shower you with praise? Similarly, buying clothes is not alone worrisome, but if it is to change your appearance more to your partner's liking or because they criticize how you currently dress, you might be looking at a red flag.

Answer C can be confusing, as many people struggle with jealousy. Working through jealousy openly and without blame can be a healthy approach in a relationship. When jealousy is used to hurt, punish or control, it can become a form of abuse.

Answer E is unacceptable. Your private life and accounts are your own.

## 2. WHEN I AM WITH MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY WITHOUT MY PARTNER:

- a. They go do something they enjoy, and let me have my own fun.
- b. They trust me, but only if I hang out with people who identify as the same gender as me.
- c. I get texts constantly while apart, asking where I am, checking in.
- d. My partner usually finds a way to invite themselves, and I feel I can't say no.
- e. My partner usually shows up unexpectedly.

**KEY:** In a healthy relationship, two partners work together to negotiate the terms of their relationship in order to set boundaries that help each feel cared for and safe. This includes being able to spend time apart without constant contact, or worrying that you are offending your partner by hanging out with family or friends.

Answer A reflects a healthy and balanced relationship based on mutual trust.

Answer B shows lack of trust in the form of conditions around gender. Pay attention.

Answer C indicates a red flag. You should be able to spend time apart without being in constant contact.

Answer D is most worrisome because of the second part of the statement: do you feel you can draw boundaries comfortably in the relationship? If not, this is an area to give attention.

Answer E is highly concerning. It might be time to talk to someone you trust.

### 3. WHEN WE ARE WITH FRIENDS, EITHER MINE OR THEIRS, MY PARTNER:

- Is friendly and welcoming, we all get along.
- Is sometimes quiet, but listens and laughs when appropriate.
- Tends to embarrass me or puts me down.
- Is friendly in person, but tears my/our friends down once we leave.
- Sometimes gets insecure, but can share and express that without being mean.

**KEY:** Your friends and family members can be great barometers of the health of your relationship. Do your friends and partner enjoy one another and get along? If they lack common interests, can they still spend time together respectfully? Does your partner value and support your other important connections?

Answers A and B reflect a healthy response to relationships outside the relationship.

Answers C and D suggest that your partner makes you feel insignificant or insecure, or does not respect your friends. This is cause for concern and examination.

Answer E shows a partner who is willing to work through their insecurities and communicate through it. The key to health lies in the ability to communicate kindly and openly.

### 4. MY FRIENDS' AND FAMILY'S EXPERIENCES OF MY PARTNER:

- It seems like my friends and/or family try to avoid spending time with my partner.
- My friends and/or family have outright told me they do not like my partner, or are worried.
- My friends and/or family really like my partner! They feel we treat each other well, and are interested in knowing one another's loved ones.
- My friends and/or family don't love my partner, but if they knew each other better.
- I try to keep my friends and/or family and my partner from spending time together.

**KEY:** Answer A opens cause for concern. Why are loved ones avoiding your partner?

Answers B and D are clear communications that something in the relationship is of concern. It is worth taking the time to set down your defenses and listen to what your loved ones have to say. Answer E shows a significant level of internal conflict within yourself. What is your internal voice telling you about why your loved ones won't get along? Answer C is an ideal scenario: family and friends see a healthy relationship in action, and experience a mutual interest to get to know your partner, and vice versa.

### 5. WHEN I'M AWAY FROM MY PARTNER I FEEL:

- A sense of freedom and relief.
- Like I miss them, but I am also happy to have some time to myself.
- Afraid to upset them, and try to keep in constant contact.
- Like throwing my phone in a lake, my partner texts me so much.
- Uneasy. What are they doing without me around?

**KEY:** In a healthy relationship, both partners should enjoy moving in and out of shared time and alone time without cause for fear, anxiety or worry. Uneasy feelings can reflect a lack of trust

Answer A requires further reflection: do you just enjoy your alone time, or do you feel restricted and bound by the relationship? Answer B reflects a healthy feeling, both honoring your relationship and relationship with self. Answers C, D and E reflect a lack of trust and signal red flags rooted in lack of trust or a sense of being overly controlled.

### 6. WHEN THINGS AREN'T GOING SMOOTHLY BETWEEN MY PARTNER AND I:

- I feel very anxious and find it hard to focus.
- I cope by using drugs, alcohol or cigarettes to calm me down.
- I have a close friend, family member or trusted adult I can confide in safely.
- I usually hide my feelings from everyone until I can resolve it with my partner.
- We take some space, and then my partner and I come together and talk through the problem calmly.

**KEY:** Every relationship encounters some measure of conflict and ups and downs. Your response to instability in the relationship is a powerful indicator of the health of your connection.

Answers A and C reflect a possible problem within yourself, or within the relationship. It is worth talking to a trusted source for further reflection. Answer B signals an unhealthy coping mechanism, and could lead to bigger problems within and outside the relationship. It is worth talking to a trusted source for further reflection or resources. Answer D might signal that



*you are hiding something problematic to protect the relationship. In whom you can safely confide? Answer E illustrates a healthy approach to dealing with conflict within an intimate relationship, where two partners take the time they need to cool off before coming back together to respectfully discuss the scenario.*

## 7. WHEN MY PARTNER IS ANGRY:

- a. They take out their anger on objects, like punching the wall or insulting or cursing at me.
- b. They tell me they do bad things because it's my fault.
- c. They hurt things or people I love, like animals or friends.
- d. They hurt themselves, or talk about hurting themselves.
- e. They can communicate how they feel without hurting me.

**KEY:** *Everybody becomes angry from time to time. Within an intimate relationship, it is important to notice how your partner responds when they experience anger, whether or not it comes up in the context of the relationship or not. Answers A and C reflect red flag behavior rooted in violence that may continue to escalate and create further harm. Answers B and D are forms of emotional abuse through the use of guilt. These are red flags. If in the relationship your partner threatens to hurt themselves, call a trusted adult or 911. Answer E shows a healthy response to interpersonal conflict.*

## 8. WHEN MY PARTNER WANTS TO TAKE THINGS TO THE NEXT LEVEL PHYSICALLY:

- a. They don't want to use safety measures such as condoms or birth control.
- b. They respect my ability to say no, and we talk openly about our boundaries.
- c. Usually they respect my no, but when alcohol or drugs are involved...
- d. They send me sexually explicit texts or emails to try to convince me to try new things.
- e. They touch me even when I don't want to be touched and say so.

**KEY:** *Your body is your own. If a partner has trouble respecting your limits, or if you feel uncomfortable sharing your boundaries, these are strong red flags. Answers A, C, D, and E reflect varying degrees of behavior that indicate your ability to consent—or not—to sexual activity is not respected. If your boundaries have been violated in any way, it may be time to confide in a trusted source to determine next steps. Answer B indicates a healthy level of respect and communication in your relationship.*

## 9. WHEN I THINK ABOUT MY PARTNER AND WHY I LIKE THEM:

- a. I find it hard to identify any good or respectful qualities about my partner when I stop to think about it.
- b. I think my partner is amazing, but I don't know if I deserve them.
- c. I can't sleep at night because I think about how cute/cool/interesting they are.
- d. They make me feel more excited than I do at school, with my friends or otherwise.
- e. I think about how my partner celebrates my hobbies, interests and talents.

**KEY:** *Not only should you be able to speak to what you like about your partner, but you should also remember why you like yourself. A partner should be another exciting part of life, rather than subsuming what else is positive about your daily life.*

*Answers A invites further reflection: if you cannot identify positive qualities about your partner, what is it that you are drawn to in the relationship? Answer B reveals a lack of trust in self. Do you need to bolster your internal resources, or connect with a trusted person to explore this feeling? Answers C and D point to an unhealthy infatuation that might be a red flag. Confide in a trusted source about these experiences. Answer E reflects a healthy bond that magnifies your self confidence.*

## WHAT NOW?

If you need urgent help, see the resources in the Intersectional Resources and Support section of this guide.

If you want to address a friend's unhealthy relationship, move to the next exercise: "Talking Points for a Concerned Friend."

If you want to create a healthier relationship, move to the "What I Learned About Relationships, I Learned From..." and "Relationship Bill of Rights" exercises.



## TALKING POINTS FOR A CONCERNED FRIEND

# HOW TO START A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION ABOUT RELATIONSHIP ABUSE

Relationship dynamics that cross the spectrum of abuse seem to be the norm in the world of the film **CUSP**, affecting people of all ages. In this unstable and confusing setting, main characters Aaloni, Autumn and Brittney often find refuge and safety within the company of each other. This intimate space between platonic friends offers space to open up about various difficult experiences they have witnessed or encountered without fear of repercussions or judgement.

The young people in **CUSP** are not alone in their experiences. Statistics show that 80 percent of teens know someone who has been controlled by a partner, and 60 percent know someone who has been physically abused.<sup>1</sup> These numbers illuminate just how common relationship abuse is, affecting people across lines of differences such as age, class, race, nationality, sexuality and gender. This means you probably know someone struggling on the spectrum of abuse—and it might not look like what you imagined.

Friends can be a very powerful resource for one another in confronting a harmful relationship. About 73 percent<sup>2</sup> of teens say they would talk through the problem of an abusive relationship with a friend, which makes you a frontline ally. If you are not sure how to open conversation with a friend you are concerned about, use the statements on the following page to help create a script to guide the conversation.

### A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND BEFORE YOU DO:

**Remember that you are a friend,** not a therapist or parent or any other role. A friend can provide a nonjudgmental space of safety in which one can share their concerns, hopes, dreams and fears without fear of being punished or abandoned.

**Listening can be the most powerful act.** When listening to your friend talk, try to refrain from sharing too many of your own opinions. Nod your head, maintain eye contact and let your friend know through your body language that you are present, and in tune with the conversation.

**You can be a great mirror.** It can be helpful to respond with questions. When listening, rephrase what your friend is saying and ask if you are hearing correctly. This way, your friend can tell you if you are misinterpreting their words, or they might see themselves differently when their own sharing is repeated back.

**Keep your own boundaries, and look for danger.** If being a safe space comes with too high of a cost for you, it might be time to step back. This might look like overly ruminating on the idea of your friend's relationship, losing sleep or feeling physically sick. If this is the case, you might need to take some space from your friend, or call on a trusted adult for support.

<sup>1</sup> [VERILYMAG.COM/2017/01/HOW-TO-REACT-WHEN-YOUR-FRIEND-VENTS-ABOUT-HER-BOYFRIEND](https://www.verilymag.com/2017/01/how-to-react-when-your-friend-vents-about-her-boyfriend)

<sup>2</sup> [REACHOUTWNY.ORG/HELP-A-FRIEND/](https://www.reachoutwny.org/help-a-friend/) [HTTPS://WWW.HERETOHELP.BC.CA/INFOSHEET/HELPING-A-FRIEND-YOURE-WORRIED-ABOUT](https://www.here-to-help.bc.ca/infosheet/helping-a-friend-youre-worried-about)



If you are ready to start the conversation, here are some words you can use:

#### START WITH:

How are things going with \_\_\_\_\_?

It seems like things are stressful right now, do you want to talk about anything?

I value your friendship, so I want to be honest with you...

There is something on my mind that I've been wanting to talk to you about...

I feel worried about something, and I want to share it with you.

#### MIRROR:

Can I reflect that back to you?

Am I right in that what I'm hearing you say is...

When you did [reflect back the scenario your friend shared], am I right that \_\_\_\_\_ responded this way?

It sounds like you are very anxious and worried about...

It sounds like you are scared that...

#### CONTINUE WITH QUESTIONS:

What do you want from your relationship? Has \_\_\_\_\_ shown you those things?

What do your friends think about \_\_\_\_\_?

How do your parents react to the relationship?

What can I do to help?

Are you ever afraid that \_\_\_\_\_ is going to hurt you if you...?

#### REASSURE WITH:

I am here for you now, or whenever you need me.

I can imagine how complicated that is.

It sounds like things are really hard.

You are a very strong person.

You did not cause this. It is not your fault.

#### TAKE ACTION WITH:

You can always talk to me, but I think an adult could be helpful. Is there someone you trust that you can talk to about this?

Have you ever considered talking to the school counselor?

Talking to a therapist can be very helpful. Should we look one up together?

If you aren't ready to talk to someone in person, maybe a hotline can be an outlet?

I think you might be in danger. Can we go to campus safety/ call 911 together?

#### WHAT IF YOUR FRIEND DOESN'T WANT HELP?

If your friend is not ready to confront their unhealthy relationship, you might have to let it go and refocus your attention back on your own life. You might let your friend know that you are available if they ever want to talk, or to spend time together without discussing their current relationship.



## WHAT I KNOW ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS, I LEARNED FROM...

# WHERE DO MY BELIEFS ABOUT INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS COME FROM?

In the film **CUSP**, Aaloni's dad tells her sister, "you're not my daughter with that on." Brittney fights with her mother about living with her boyfriend Caden, and points out how her parents also became romantically involved while in an age gap relationship with legal implications. Characters throughout the film, often with a sense of hopelessness, discuss dysfunctional—and sometimes violent—relationships between men and women as "just how it is."

Where do beliefs about relationships come from? As the examples above show, our beliefs are strongly influenced by outside forces: our family, our friends and the cultural norms of the dominant society (for example: what we see in television shows and hear in heartbreak anthems). Have you ever examined where your beliefs come from? Let's find out.

**STEP ONE:** In the following box, write down all of the beliefs that you have about being in relationships. It doesn't matter at this stage if you consider them positive or negative beliefs: just write everything that comes to mind:

**STEP TWO:** Read back through the list you generated. Ask yourself the following questions, and next to each statement, mark them with the origin that most fits:

- a. This is a belief that I have considered and come to on my own.
- b. This is a belief that comes from my family.
- c. This is a belief that comes from my social circle.
- d. This is a belief that I've learned from society, or the media.

For example:

*When two people are intoxicated, it's not rape.* — **B**

*My partner's pleasure is more important than my own.* — **D**

*Crying is a sign of weakness.* — **C, B, D**

*In a healthy relationship, either partner's "no" should be respected.* — **A**

**STEP THREE:** Based on the previous sections of this workbook—"Understanding the Issue," "Talking Points For A Concerned Friend" and the "Is My Relationship Healthy Quiz"—would you consider each of your beliefs as healthy or unhealthy? Which beliefs will you carry with you into the future? Bring them directly onto the next page in the next exercise when creating your "Relationship Bill of Rights."

# CREATE YOUR RELATIONSHIP BILL OF RIGHTS

## DETERMINE WHAT IS HEALTHY FOR YOU IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Now that you've completed this workbook, you have the insight and tools necessary to craft your own relationship bill of rights—a document that can help you identify and declare what you deserve and desire in a relationship. This document can help you prepare for future relationships, and/or offers a self-created guide to cross check a relationship against.

You might begin with some of the new, empowering beliefs you created in the “Examining My Beliefs” section of this workbook, or use the problem statements contained across the workbook as guidelines to write against (for example, I have the right to keep my online accounts private).

Consider what a healthy relationship looks like. How do you feel? Act? How are you treated? What will you accept, and what won't you?

This document can be shared and discussed with friends (it would make a great group activity!), and certainly with a partner as a way to get on the same page about expectations. If your relationship bill of rights is violated in any way, take time to pause, examine and reflect on why that is, and what you want to do about it.

See if you can create 15 guidelines for yourself. That might sound like a lot, but you are worth it.

Here are a few to start with.

(your name)'s

### RELATIONSHIP BILL OF RIGHTS:

1. I have the right to be treated with respect.
2. I have the right to feel safe.
3. I have the right to say no and not feel guilty about it.
4. I have the right to spend as much time with my friends and family as I want.
5. I have the right to change my mind.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.



# RESOURCES AND ORGANIZATIONS

## TO GO DEEPER INTO THE ISSUES

### ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACES)

ACEs can have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity. The Center for Disease Control works to understand and prevent ACEs.

A CALL TO MEN We work to transform society by promoting healthy, respectful manhood and offering trainings and educational resources for companies, government agencies, schools, and community group

ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH Advocates for Youth works alongside thousands of young people here in the U.S. and around the globe as they fight for sexual health, rights, and justice.

COACHING BOYS INTO MEN Athletic coaches play an extremely influential and unique role in the lives of young men. Because of these relationships, coaches are poised to positively influence how young men think and behave, both on and off the field. Coaching Boys Into Men (CBIM) is the only evidence-based prevention program that trains and motivates high school coaches to teach their young male athletes healthy relationship skills and that violence never equals strength.

DATING MATTERS® Dating Matters: Strategies to Promote Healthy Teen Relationships is a comprehensive teen dating violence prevention model developed by Center for Disease Control to stop teen dating violence before it starts. Dating Matters is an evidence-based teen dating violence prevention model that includes prevention strategies for individuals, peers, families, schools, and neighborhoods. It focuses on teaching 11-14 year olds healthy relationship skills before they start dating and reducing behaviors that increase the risk for dating violence, like substance abuse and sexual risk-taking. Also from the CDC, learn more about sexual violence and intimate partner violence among [people with disabilities here](#).

ESPERANZA UNITED With nearly forty years of success, Esperanza United leverages the strengths of Latin@ communities to end gender-based violence. Founded and led by Latinas, we ground our work in listening to the community adapting to meet their changing needs. We work with the community, other service providers, and systems to ensure Latinas, their families, and our communities receive culturally relevant advocacy and quality, appropriate, and effective resources.

FUTURES WITHOUT VIOLENCE Futures Without Violence is a health and social justice nonprofit with a simple mission: to heal those among us who are traumatized by violence today - and to create healthy families and communities free of violence tomorrow. From domestic violence and child abuse, to bullying and sexual assault, our groundbreaking programs, policy development, and public action campaigns are designed to prevent and end violence against women and children around the world.

LOVE IS RESPECT A project of the National Domestic Violence Hotline, Love is Respect offers 24/7 information, support, and advocacy to young people between the ages of 13 and 26 who have questions or concerns about their romantic relationships. They also provide support to concerned friends and family members, teachers, counselors, and other service providers through the same free and confidential services via phone, text, and live chat.

'ME TOO.' MOVEMENT The 'me too.' Movement serves as a convener, innovator, thought leader, and organizer across the mainstream and the grassroots to address systems that allow for the proliferation of sexual violence, specifically in Black, queer, trans, disabled, and all communities of color. Leveraging its model and framework, grounded in existing research and theory, 'me too.' centers individual and community healing and transformation, empowerment through empathy, shifting cultural narratives and practices and advancing a global survivor-led movement to end sexual violence.

NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE (NAESV) NAESV is the voice in Washington for the 56 state and territorial sexual assault coalitions and 1300 rape crisis centers working to end sexual violence and support survivors.

NATIONAL INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER A Native-led nonprofit organization dedicated to ending violence against Native women and children. The NIWRC provides national leadership in ending gender-based violence in tribal communities by lifting up the collective voices of grassroots advocates and offering culturally grounded resources, technical assistance and training, and policy development to strengthen tribal sovereignty.

**THE NATIONAL SEXUAL VIOLENCE RESOURCE CENTER**

**(NSVRC)** NSVRC is the leading nonprofit in providing information and tools to prevent and respond to sexual violence. NSVRC translates research and trends into best practices that help individuals, communities and service providers achieve real and lasting change. NSVRC also works with the media to promote informed reporting. Every April, NSVRC leads Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM), a campaign to educate and engage the public in addressing this widespread issue. NSVRC is also one of the three founding organizations of RALIANCE, a national, collaborative initiative dedicated to ending sexual violence in one generation.

**ONE LOVE FOUNDATION** One Love Foundation is a national non-profit organization with the goal of ending relationship abuse. We empower young people with the tools and resources they need to see the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships and bring life-saving prevention education to their communities.

**RAPE, ABUSE & INCEST NATIONAL NETWORK (RAINN)**

RAINN is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800.656.HOPE, [online.rainn.org](https://online.rainn.org) y [rainn.org/es](https://rainn.org/es)) in partnership with more than 1,000 local sexual assault service providers across the country and operates the DoD Safe Helpline for the Department of Defense. RAINN also carries out programs to prevent sexual violence, help survivors, and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

**THE TREVOR PROJECT** The Trevor Project is the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) young people.

**TEXAS ADVOCACY PROJECT** Texas Advocacy Project's mission is to end dating and domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking in Texas. Texas Advocacy Project empowers survivors through free legal services and access to the justice system, and advances prevention through public outreach and education. Our attorneys, staff, volunteers, and Board of Directors are committed to advancing our vision that all Texans live free from abuse.

**UJIMA INC.** Launched in 2016, Ujima, Inc.: The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community serves as a national, culturally-specific services issue resource center to provide support to and be a voice for the Black Community in response to domestic, sexual and community violence. Ujima was founded in response to a need for an active approach to ending domestic, sexual and community violence in the Black community.

**UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS MEDICAL BRANCH'S CENTER FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION**

The Center for Violence Prevention at the UTMB was founded in an effort to reduce the burden of violence in Texas and across the United States through research, best practices, policy making, evaluation, training, and partnerships with community agencies. With support from the National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Justice, and multiple state and foundation awards, the Center conducts innovative research to prevent multiple forms of violence. [Learn more](#) about UTMB's new study that focuses on preventing teen dating violence with a 'healthy relationship curriculum'.

**URBAN INSTITUTE** The Urban Institute is the trusted source for unbiased, authoritative insights that inform consequential choices about the well-being of people and places in the United States. We are a nonprofit research organization that believes decisions shaped by facts, rather than ideology, have the power to improve public policy and practice, strengthen communities, and transform people's lives for the better. Explore the Urban Institute's research on [teen dating abuse in the digital age](#) at and research on [Dating Violence Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth](#).