

# Relate NI



**Relieve The Pressure:  
Couples, Christmas &  
Toxic Communication Styles**

# About Relate NI

Relate NI is passionate about enabling good quality relationships and that's why our mission is to make expert information and support for healthy relationships available to everyone. Through our experience of working with parents and children throughout Northern Ireland, we've come to understand that relationships not only give our lives meaning, they are of vital importance to our happiness.

For the last 75 years, we have been supporting the health and wellbeing of children & young people, individuals, couples, and families through our therapeutic services because we know how important our relationships are to our health and wellbeing.

Visit our website for more guidance on how to 'Relieve the Pressure' on your relationships throughout Christmas and the Cost of Living Crisis.

[www.relateni.org/relieve-the-pressure](http://www.relateni.org/relieve-the-pressure)



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87% of people told us that relationship support helped to improve their well-being

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# Introduction

Relationships are something that we share together. Friendships, intimate partnerships, work colleagues – all the interactions that we bring into our lives need to be cared for, nurtured, cherished.

Our relationships have the capacity to improve our well-being, our sense of ourselves. They motivate us to be the best we can be.

At this time of financial crisis and austerity our relationships can be what holds us together but they can also suffer under the external pressures. Your intimate relationship ought to add to your life, not take away.

Relate NI in no way wishes to normalise the experiences of the financial crisis.

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Instead, we want to offer ways of supporting your relationships to survive and thrive despite the external burden of anxiety placed on people.

Financial hardship is a well-documented contributory to poor mental health including depression, anxiety as well as impacting on our physical health leading to heart problems and high blood pressure. With all this pressure our relationships can suffer severely.

This resource aims to support you to carry out some relationship maintenance, safeguarding you and your loved ones during the Winter Period.



# Couples, Christmas & The Cost of Living Crisis

The current economic crisis combined with the stress of Christmas is physically and mentally exhausting. Feeling so depleted can impact on your relationship when you are so stressed, feeling upset and anxious.

In every healthy intimate relationship there will be difference, different opinions, different behaviours and these differences can lead to conflict.

Managing differences in a helpful way will support a relationship and keep your couple relationship away from reaching crisis point.

Due to the financial crisis many of the usual supports become less readily available. If your relationship feels under duress you may consider counselling.

Relate NI recognises that there can be financial and other barriers to accessing counselling services

and that's why we have a number of different pathways to access counselling support. Visit [relateni.org/fees-funding-options/](https://relateni.org/fees-funding-options/) for more information.

There are also different kinds of support offered by Relate NI. The Relationship MOT is an accessible, one-off session that can support your relationship and help you add a little sparkle this Winter. Visit [relateni.org/relateni-services/the-relationship-mot/](https://relateni.org/relateni-services/the-relationship-mot/)

For those who may not feel ready for counselling or in person support, on the next page our expert counselling team have put together some tips to support you and your partner in taking responsibility for looking after your relationship together in the good times, but especially now in very challenging times.

[NB: This guide is meant for relationships that are experiencing stress. They are not meant for relationships where there is abuse. Specialist help is needed then. If you are wondering if you are in an abusive relationship please check this website for more information. <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/domestic-abuse>)



# The Four Horsemen that can predict separation...

**Communication.** Talking together. Sharing your news, the joys and worries of the day – things that went well and things that were challenging.

A vital aspect to communication is listening, really listening to each other. There can be a habit of waiting for a gap in the conversation to take your 'turn', waiting to respond rather than listening to understand, to hear what is being said, to bear witness to your partner's experiences, hopes, complaints.

Another unhelpful habit in couple conversations can be jumping in with 'solutions' when your partner is sharing a story when a solution has not been requested.

Good quality listening is paying attention to your partner, being interested, curious. Remember when you first started to get to know each other, how you hung on every word your partner said? Rediscover that ability to listen to one another with generosity.

Some studies have identified a **helpful ratio of positive interactions to negative**. The research indicates that for every one unhelpful or negative interaction there needs to be five positive ones. Negative ways of relating to each other can be organised into four different patterns;

**criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling.** Combined together these behaviours will significantly damage a relationship.

**Criticism** is usually an attempt to 'prove' that someone is 'wrong' and another person is 'right'. None of us want to take up the role of being 'wrong'. Criticism often attacks a person's character ('you never listen') whereas a complaint focuses on behaviour ('I'm feeling left out of our conversations recently.'). Using the 'I' statement (I feel) means that there is no blame and when there is no blame real conversations can take place rather than escalating to an argument.

**Contempt** undermines another person's sense of self. It can include insulting another person through name calling or being sarcastic. Contempt can be communicated powerfully through body language, eye rolling for example or shrugging. It is destructive and demoralising behaviour. Instead of this defeating behaviour concentrate on creating a nurturing environment, with appreciation and respect. Regularly expressing gratitude and affection respectfully builds a positive and strong relationship, that in turn can withstand the challenges life brings.

**Defensiveness** can be a mechanism to try to protect oneself from perceived criticism. A common aspect of defensiveness includes cross complaining, which means meeting your partner's complaint with a complaint of your own. In this way you don't have to pay attention to what your partner said.

**Stonewalling** happens when a partner thinks that they are withdrawing to avoid conflict but instead are communicating disapproval, disconnection. Stonewalling is communicated by the 'silent treatment' or changing the subject.

This can happen to a person when they feel overwhelmed so the reaction is to shut down, stop talking and disengage.

Stonewalling means that the person in the relationship is experiencing a lot of emotional pressure. Their heart rate increases, stress hormones are released into the bloodstream and this can lead to a fight or flight response.

To stop this escalating it is important to continue to develop self-soothing techniques to support emotional regulation. This starts with taking time out for an agreed period and very importantly, agreeing to return to the conversation within the agreed time frame (at the very least an hour later, it will take this time for your heart rate to return to normal). Spend the break doing something restful and distracting (listening to music, a bit of exercise), don't spend it ruminating on the issue at hand.

Take the time to rest, restore and rejuvenate so that you can have a meaningful and helpful conversation together.

Take the time to validate and affirm your partner. Let them know that you hear and understand what it is that they are saying, what they are telling you about their feelings.

Take up the position of appreciation. Remember the useful quota that there needs to be five positive interactions for one negative.

Be actively responsible in the relationship by thinking about, 'what can I learn from this?' and 'how can I do this better?'

It's very tempting to think that if only your partner did something or stopped doing something else then the relationship could be so much improved.

Both of you share the responsibility for taking care of the relationship together. Each of you have responsibility for your own part in the relationship.



# We can Relate

The tips and guidance contained in this book are aimed at helping you **Relieve the Pressure** you and your partner may be facing, which is being exacerbated by the circumstances of this Winter. Relate NI's team of skilled and professional counsellors are also available to help people with their relationship issues, whether big or small. Your relationship doesn't need to be at a time of crisis to benefit from Relate NI services. In fact, 78% of people who used our services last year told us they wished they'd attended sooner.

Use the details below to contact us to find out how we can support you.

**If you would benefit from speaking to one of our trained counsellors, contact us at:**

**028 90323454**  
**[office@relateni.org](mailto:office@relateni.org)**

## **Relate NI Services:**

- **Adult Relationship Counselling for Individuals Or Couples**
- **Family Counselling**
- **Relate Kids**
- **Relate Teen**
- **Sex Therapy**
- **Relationship MOT**

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