

# Sexual Health Communications and Relationships Among Young Adults:

## Executive Summary of Qualitative and Quantitative Research Findings



## Introduction

Communicating openly with sexual and romantic partners is key to good sexual health and well-being; these conversations can help protect sexual health, increase pleasure, and improve relationships. Yet, for many young adults, these discussions are often anxiety-producing or avoided altogether. The National Coalition for Sexual Health (NCSH) conducted research with young adults to explore their sexual health communications and relationship experiences, including the perceived benefits of and barriers to open communication; their comfort level in talking openly; the topics they'd like to discuss more openly; the skills and information that would help them better communicate; and the best channels and messengers for reaching them.

## Methods

From March to August of 2022, NCSH conducted an IRB-approved national research study employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Reflecting the diversity of this audience, we recruited young adults (ages 18 – 26) of different gender identities, sexual orientations, races/ethnicities, and socioeconomic status to participate. Professional moderators led sixteen focus groups with 79 young adults, and 1,256 young adults completed an online survey with 22 questions. The research was conducted and analyzed by Michaels Opinion Research, Inc., in collaboration with NCSH/Altarum staff. For this research, “partner” was defined as someone you have “talked to,” dated, or had any type of sex with; “relationship” was broadly defined as sexual and/or romantic contact of any type or duration.

## Key Findings

### I. Relationship Experiences

#### *Types of relationships*

Young adults report four main types of relationships that may or may not involve sexual contact/intimacy:

- 1) “Just talking,” either online or in person, which often doesn’t progress due to lack of chemistry or compatibility
- 2) “Dating” or casual sexual interactions that go beyond “talking,” but may or may not be exclusive
- 3) Committed and/or exclusive relationships reached through mutual agreement
- 4) Sexual relationships without any level of commitment.

### *Relationship experiences*

Young adults report both positive and negative relationship experiences, with many saying their expectations have not been met, leaving them disappointed and cautious about future relationships. However, a solid majority report (62%) that they have often experienced relationships where they feel “safe and secure” and “respected” by partners (57%). However, almost half (49%) say they often do not have open and honest communication with partners, and a majority report that they “often or sometimes” have had partners who were jealous (59%), untruthful or lied to them (56%), controlling (46%), didn’t respect their boundaries (43%), or didn’t support them (40%).

### *Qualities of positive relationships*

Many young adults said that open communication and trust are the most important characteristics of positive relationships, yet these qualities are also the hardest to achieve. Open communication is key to being on the same page about the relationship, setting boundaries, and being yourself, according to participants. Other positive qualities they value include mutual respect, feeling safe and secure, respecting boundaries, mutual sexual satisfaction, and feeling supported. As focus group participants said,

*“Communication is a big thing, because if you can’t say how you feel or express something that’s not going well in the relationship, then you really can’t move forward.”*

*“Once someone tells a lie, then I doubt everything you told me before... I think your name isn’t real, your age isn’t real. I doubt everything.”*

*“You and your partner just need to have that kind of chemistry.”*

*“There needs to be a sense I can tell you things or I feel safe enough to tell you things.”*

### *Qualities of negative relationships*

When it comes to negative relationship qualities, participants reported a long list, including lack of communication, lack of trust, and partners who are controlling, jealous, unsupportive, inconsistent, and don’t respect their boundaries. Several participants mentioned their prior relationships were toxic, and that some included sexual trauma and abuse. Participants described these negative qualities:

*“Controlling who I talk to, what I wear, where I go.”*

*“Jealousy can turn any relationship ugly very quickly, and with women that’s a big thing. But it’s also really scare when it comes to men.”*

*“They give you a lot of attention one day, and the next day they’re oh, I don’t want to talk to you today.”*

*“Sometimes it’s just pure pleasure. One person receiving it, but the other person’s not having fun. So, if it’s one-sided, then you wouldn’t consider it a positive (one).”*

## II. Communications with Partners

### *Overall comfort level*

When it comes to starting a conversation about sexual health or relationship topics with partners, a majority (52%) said they experience either a great deal or a fair amount of nervousness or anxiety. (Specifically, 17% said a great deal, while 35% said a fair amount.)

### *Comfort level with specific topics*

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of young adults say they are “very comfortable” talking with partners about safer sex topics. While more than half (55%) say they are comfortable talking openly about sexual boundaries, 45% are not comfortable. Notably, over half are not very comfortable discussing their sexual likes and dislikes (51%) and their emotions, feelings, and personal needs (53%).

### *Preparing in advance*

Just over half (55%) of young adults say they organize their thoughts and words before having sensitive discussions. About one in three say they talk to a friend for advice, about one in four search the internet for tips and advice, and only 14% report talking to a parent and 12% to a health care provider or therapist. Thirteen percent report drinking alcohol or using drugs before talking.

### *Topics discussed before sex*

Many young adults report not discussing any sexual health topics before becoming sexually involved with someone. Among those who do talk, the list of topics could include sexual likes/dislikes/boundaries; whether partners have been tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs); use of protection, such as condoms and/or birth control; consent; and past or present sexual partners. Many indicated that they would like to discuss certain topics with partners, but they often wait until they have a better sense of whether the relationship will progress.

It’s important to note that some participants never ask partners about STIs for one of three reasons:

- 1) They don’t think the answer is reliable
- 2) They think the question is offensive
- 3) They think it’s not important to know since they will be using condoms.

And while some said they discuss condoms before sex, others said they didn’t discuss condoms or other forms of birth control, nor do they use either when engaging in sex. As focus group members commented:

*“I always talk about sexual preferences. I don’t want my experience with a previous lady on you. How do you prefer your sex?”*

*“I always ask if we’re both ok with mutual consent.”*

*“I always ask about STDs...always got to say clean.”*

*“I think that to ask about (STI testing) directly is offensive to girls. I’ve never asked that question because I don’t test myself. It would flip the question on me...”*

*“I think the use of condoms is not the first thought in a lot of sexual partners’ heads... I’ve put myself in some weird situations because of that.”*

### III. Barriers to Open Communication

Young adults identified 16 different barriers to communicating openly with partners, which can be grouped into concerns about how a partner might react, self-confidence and self-esteem, lack of knowledge, feeling safe or secure in a relationship, family upbringing, and norms/stereotypes. The following barriers were mentioned by about half of respondents:

- Not wanting to hurt a partner’s feelings (54%)
- Not knowing when and how to bring up topics (49%)
- Low self-esteem/lack of confidence (48%)
- Worry partner will get angry or upset (47%)
- Not feeling secure in the relationship (46%)
- Feeling embarrassed about certain topics (46%)
- Worry your partner will reject you (46%)

Other barriers mentioned by nearly a third or more included worry that your partner will judge you unfairly, the relationship isn’t serious, belief it won’t make a difference, not feeling safe, family upbringing, not having enough knowledge, gender roles, religious upbringing, and alcohol or drug use. In the focus groups another common theme was not wanting to be or feel vulnerable.

### IV. Benefits to Open Communication

When asked to select the top benefits of talking openly with your partners, these rose to the top: feelings of safety and trust (50%); having a closer bond with your partner(s) (42%); being on the same page about your relationship (38%); having a better sex life (37%); and peace of mind/less anxiety/less worry (37%).

In contrast, ranking much lower were protecting your sexual health (23%), protecting your partner’s sexual health (16%), less worry about unplanned pregnancy (14%), and less worry about STIs (11%). However, it’s important to note that “peace of mind/less anxiety/less worry” is open to individual interpretation and could relate to the relationship, physical health, and/or emotions.

Focus group members elaborated on these benefits:

*“Just feeling closer. Being able to confide in someone.”*

*“It’s easier for you to get something out that you don’t want to say just because the communication is there, the trust is there...”*

*“I think it’s important to talk about what your intentions are in the beginning, just because it will save you so much time and pain.”*

*“It (open communication) helps so that you are both being satisfied in the way that you want to be satisfied.”*

*“I think the main benefit is safety and satisfaction – physical, emotional, spiritual, mental, all senses. Financial. All senses.”*

## **V. Topics They’d Like to Discuss More Openly**

Young adults identified many sexual health and relationship topics they would like to discuss more openly with current or future partners. In fact, 93% of survey respondents want to talk more openly about one or more relationship topics, while 85% said they wanted to talk more openly about sexual health topics.

When it comes to sexual health topics they’d like to discuss more openly, the most frequently selected were use of condoms (48%), use of birth control (47%), and pregnancy and raising a child (42%). Approximately 33% also want to discuss preventing STIs and testing for STIs, while nearly 25% said abortion and 20% said anatomy.

*“I just wish for testing to be a lot more normal because I think that should be held to a higher regard.”*

*“Birth control and abortion are really big things. Family planning and all that entails.”*

*“...I feel like condoms are important because if you get pregnant, like I’m pregnant, he’s not pregnant. It’s not really their problem.”*

*“I would say anatomy because I feel like a lot people, especially young people, we have been misdirected about the woman’s body through movies, shows or music or people who watch porn a lot.”*

When it comes to relationship topics they’d like to talk about more openly, discussing sexual desires/likes/dislikes was at the top of list at 57%, followed by using sex toys (41%), defining the relationship (39%), feelings of jealousy (38%), giving consent to specific sexual activities (37%), and sexual problems (34%). At least one in four young adults also want to discuss dissatisfaction with how a partner is treating them, feeling pressured to have sex, porn use, whether a partner is having sex with other people, and sexual trauma or abuse.

*“I think the use of sex toys and porn...I feel like after ‘50 Shades of Grey’ came out, it totally changed the dynamic of how people want to have sex.”*

*“Abuse is something that’s traumatizing, and it can be hard to even talk about with someone you are comfortable with...It’s challenging.”*

*“If you’re having feelings of jealousy, it’s bad if you repress them and don’t talk about it.”*

*“The idea of exclusivity. I dated this guy for a year. I thought he was my boyfriend. Meanwhile, I found a condom wrapper in his bed, but we did not use condoms. He’s like, ‘we were never dating.’”*

## VI. Skills and Information to Improve Communications

Young adults identified many types of skills and some new information that would help them better communicate with partners. Overall, they would like to learn skills for communicating with partners, how to have a healthy relationship, and how to improve self-esteem. It’s important to note that factual content about sexual health ranks much lower on the list.

Specifically, at the top of the list were how to communicate emotional needs (44%), have a healthy relationship (41%), and improve self-esteem/self-confidence (41%). These were closely followed by setting, communicating, and asserting boundaries (39%), skills for communicating with partners (38%), communicating my sexual needs (37%), and resolving conflicts with partners (37%).

Other topics of interest include information about safer sex and sexual health (29%), discussing sexual trauma (26%), discussing abortion/pregnancy/raising a child (22%), and handling upbringing (family or religious) at 19%. Talking with partners about STI testing and results (17%) and overcoming gender stereotypes (16%) completed the list.

## VII. Sources, Channels, and Messengers

Young adults (40%) report that “Google searches” have been the most helpful for information or advice on sexual health and relationships, followed by female friends (37%), and their partners (30%). Just over one in four (27%) report their doctor/health care provider, followed by male friends (22%), social media influencers (19%), therapists (19%), and parents/caregivers (18%).

When asked specifically about **online** sources for sexual health/relationship information and tips, nearly half of young adults report they would conduct Google or internet searches (49%), while 43% indicated they would use a health website, such as WebMD. In terms of social media, YouTube tops the list at 37%, followed by TikTok (29%), Instagram (25%), Reddit (19%), Podcasts (18%), and Twitter (17%).

## VIII. Formats, Messengers, and Tone

### *Formats*

Most young adults indicate that they are avid consumers of online content, both in video and text formats. Specifically, they mentioned videos; podcasts; live, in-person Q&A sessions; zines, which are typically short form, self-published text, drawings, mini-comics; quizzes; and short-form text materials. Several thought in-person formats could be helpful, such as Facebook communities and online support groups, while another suggested developing segments for “MasterClass,” a streaming platform with segments recorded by professionals.

### *Messengers*

Most young adults said they lacked positive role models for open communication and healthy relationships, and that they did not want to replicate their parents’ behaviors. As a result, their peers and health care providers were named as the most credible and relatable messengers for this campaign. Some felt that celebrities who were known for their relationships – and who are willing to share both positive examples and their struggles – could be good messengers. Young adults also advised that messengers should reflect the diversity of their community.

### *Campaign tone*

Young adults said they wouldn’t respond well to a campaign that gave commands and was very directive. Instead, they prefer a campaign driven by key questions, practical how-to advice and examples, and opportunities to interact with others. Campaign themes should also tie-in to today’s relationship realities, particularly their common struggles with gaslighting (e.g., manipulating you into thinking that you are the problem, and that your perceptions, experiences, and thoughts are wrong) and love-bombing (e.g., giving someone excessive attention and/or affection to manipulate and even emotionally abuse them).

## IX. Conclusions and Recommendations

When it comes to communicating openly and building positive relationships, most young adults lack access to education and positive role models. As a result, relationships often fail to meet their expectations, and communications are often anxiety-producing and avoided. However, young adults recognize that open communication and trust are key to healthy relationships and want to talk more directly and honestly with partners about a wide variety of sexual health and relationship topics. Young adults can identify the many benefits of doing so, such as increasing feelings of safety of trust, having a closer bond with partner(s), being on the same page about the relationship, having a better sex life, and reducing anxiety. Yet, many barriers stand in their way, including fears about how a partner will react, lack of skills and knowledge about how and when to discuss topics, and low self-esteem.

To motivate and empower young adults to communicate openly and build positive relationships, it's important to pinpoint the key factors influencing their behavior and develop messages that address them. Based on these research findings, it's clear that building skills and changing attitudes should be the primary focus of messaging and education, rather than factual information. However, young adults did identify a few information gaps that should also be addressed as part of messaging, which we describe below. For the sexual health field, we suggest the following message priorities relating to skills, attitudes, and knowledge:

### *Skills*

Build general skills: to communicate effectively with partners (e.g., how and when to start the conversation, resolve conflicts, handle negative reactions, and be a good listener); to talk about specific sexual health and relationship topics that are of greatest concern to young adults; to create positive relationships and leave unhealthy relationships; and to reduce anxiety and embarrassment around open communications. Other skills to address include building self-esteem/self-confidence; overcoming negative influences from one's upbringing; and rising above gender roles/stereotypes.

### *Attitudes and beliefs*

Change the belief that communicating openly will usually disrupt a relationship and that conflict is inherently bad. Create the beliefs that we can reduce anxiety and embarrassment when talking openly; that there are many benefits to open communication (e.g., increasing feelings of safety and trust, being closer with partners, and being on the same page about your relationship); that the person who starts the conversation is “good, sexy, and attractive, and that they care about you and your sexual health”; and that communication matters, whether it's a short, long-term, casual, or serious relationship.

### *Knowledge*

Increase knowledge of: what is a healthy relationship and how should partners treat each other; how to prepare for conversations in advance; how to discuss trauma experienced by you and/or your partner(s); and how to discuss pregnancy, raising a child and abortion.

