This chapter is about how to take care of your overall health. This may not seem as important as some other things in this book, but it is! Knowing how to stay healthy is very important. In fact, many health problems can be avoided altogether if you eat well, take exercise, practise good hygiene and feel good about yourself.

It is your responsibility to take care of these things on a daily basis, and to look and feel as good as possible. Your body has to last you your lifetime. It is the only one you will ever have, so take care of it!

**KEEPING CLEAN, SMELLING NICE**

Everybody wants to look nice, but feeling attractive can seem especially important during adolescence because of all the big changes you experience. Not only does the body change shape during puberty, but it starts producing new smells, new fluids and new worries for many young people. Practising good hygiene can be a very good way to feel more comfortable with your body and all these changes.

*Bathe at least once a day to stay fresh and clean.*

**Sandra, 13, Uganda**

*“Always bathe, wash and iron to appear smart!”*

Good hygiene is especially important during adolescence because your skin begins producing more fluids than it did when you were a child, and some of these fluids can cause unpleasant smells if you do not bathe.

The main fluid you may notice is sweat. Sweat, which is mostly water, is produced by glands in the skin. The sweat glands become much more active when you reach puberty, so many
adolescents notice that they sweat a lot. They also notice that their sweat takes on a different smell and taste than the simple watery sweat of a child who has been running in the sun.

Your armpits have many sweat glands, but you also have many sweat glands in your hands, feet and even your genitals, so you may notice that you are perspiring more in these places too. The smell of your perspiration will change during puberty, but these changes in body odour are natural and healthy. They are signs of growing up.

Although some people worry about the smell of their sweat, and especially their underarm perspiration, bathing once or twice a day, and wearing clean clothing should be enough to keep you fresh and clean. If you perspire a lot and it bothers you, wear cotton underwear and loose cotton clothes. Cotton is more absorbent than synthetic materials, and it allows air to flow through the cloth, which helps keep you cooler. Some people buy roll-on or spray deodorants to prevent underarm odour, but these products can be costly. Bathing and wearing clean clothes usually works fine.

Like sweat, other bodily fluids—menstrual blood, vaginal fluids, semen and smegma (the white lubricating substance under the foreskin of the penis)—are basically clean. But once these fluids leave the body, bacteria can grow in them, causing bad smells or sometimes infection. Therefore, it is important to clean the genital area—around the vagina and the penis—daily. Boys who are not circumcised need to pull back the foreskin and gently clean away the smegma (see Chapter 3).

Girls need to clean in between the inner and outer lips of the vulva, but they do not need to clean inside the vagina with soaps because the vagina cleans and protects itself with its own vaginal discharge. Good hygiene is especially important during your menstrual periods (see Chapter 4).

For washing the genitals, ordinary bathing soap is fine. You should not use strong antiseptic soaps or deodorants in the genital area because they can cause irritation. In addition, strong soaps can kill good bacteria that usually live in places like the vagina and that help protect against certain infections. After washing, always dry yourself and put on clean panties.

If you have dry skin, putting some vaseline, mineral oil, cocoa butter or other lotion on your hands, arms and legs will help. Lotions put on just after bathing help to keep moisture in your skin.

Wash your hands frequently. Always wash your hands after using the toilet and before eating or preparing food. Keep your nails clean by keeping them short.

CARE FOR YOUR TEETH

Your mouth is another place where bacteria live, so taking care of your teeth is another important part of practising good hygiene. The bacteria in your mouth can eat holes into the teeth.
These holes are called cavities, and they can be very painful. Decayed teeth can cause infections that affect other parts of your body.

Brushing your teeth at least twice a day—or after meals and before you sleep—can help kill bacteria that feed on the food particles in your mouth and cause tooth decay and gum disease. Keeping your teeth clean can also help to ensure nice breath.

You should clean the surface of every tooth—both in the front and the back of your mouth. You should also try to clean between your teeth. Toothbrushes and toothpaste are best, but if you don’t have toothpaste, even clean water will work fine. You can also clean your teeth with a little salt and water, which will help prevent gum and mouth infections.

You should avoid eating a lot of sweet foods and sodas. Besides having little nutritional value, they cause tooth decay. It is also important to avoid sharing toothbrushes because this can spread illnesses.

**PIMPLES**

During puberty, the oil glands in your skin become more active, and they start producing an oily substance called sebum. You have these oil glands throughout your skin, all over your body. They are especially numerous on your face, neck, shoulders, upper chest and back.

Sebum is a good substance because it helps keep your skin soft, elastic, and young-looking. However, during adolescence, your oil glands can produce too much sebum, and the excess sebum can block the pores (small openings) in your skin. This can cause problems, like pimples.

The oiliness of your skin and how much excess sebum you produce during puberty determine how vulnerable you are to these skin problems. Having some pimples is normal and very common. In fact, at least 8 out of 10 teenagers have pimples sometime during adolescence. Pimples are most common between the ages of 14 and 17, but they also happen to older and younger boys and girls.

Some teenagers have a lot of pimples—a problem called acne. Acne tends to run in families. If your parents or older brothers and sisters had acne, you may be more likely to develop it. For a few people, acne continues to be a problem even after their teens.

Stress may be a factor in getting pimples. Many teenagers find that they get a lot of pimples just before an important event like a big date, a match or exams, or anything they are very nervous or excited about. Some girls notice that they get more pimples just before their menstrual periods.

There are many myths about pimples, and some people say wrong things such as: “Pimples are a sign that a girl or boy is longing for sexual encounters.” This is not true! Sex does not cure pimples!
WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT PIMPLES?

Pimples are a normal part of adolescence, and unfortunately, there is no way to avoid them altogether. Nor are there any miracle cures for acne. However, there are a few things you can do to take care of your skin that may help.

Keeping your skin clean is very important, especially if you live in hot, dusty or humid places. You can use a bathing soap and warm water to gently wash areas where your skin is oily—your face, neck, shoulders, back, and upper chest. Washing these places at least once a day will help remove the oil from the surface of the skin and keep your pores clean and open.

But do not wash your skin too much or use strong, harsh soaps because they can irritate your skin and make pimples worse. Never use strong laundry soaps, detergents or bleach, as these will damage your skin. You should also try to make sure that any oils that you put in your hair do not get on your face because these oils and hair tonics can also block the pores in your skin. Lastly, be careful about using face creams and skin lighteners. Even though the packaging may promise to give you clear, beautiful skin, some creams may actually make things worse. In addition, many skin lighteners contain substances that are very unhealthy.

Although it may be tempting at times, it is not a good idea to squeeze pimples or pick at them. If you do this, the pus can spread the infection to other pores. You can also get permanent scars.

Pimples are a nuisance. They can be painful and sore, and they can be embarrassing at times. But, they are a normal part of adolescence. A lot of teenagers feel as though they are the only person with bad skin problems, but that is mainly because they don't notice that their peers have them too. Your pimples are much more noticeable to you than they are to anyone else. You may think that everyone is staring at them, seeing only bad skin and not you. But this is not true. Other people have many other things to think about and what they really notice is who you are—not what your skin looks like.

So, take courage and don't let a few pimples depress you! You will not have them forever.

HAIR CARE

We have hair all over our body, but especially on our heads, as well as in our armpits and around the genitals. Taking care of your hair is another part of practising good hygiene and taking good care of your body.
The hair on your head is pretty easy to care for—especially if you keep it short. Whether you keep your hair short and natural, plaited or permed, you should wash it to keep it free from dust and dirt. If you are in school, try not to share hair combs because this can spread lice or the fungal infection, ringworm. If you do share combs, make sure you carefully wash the comb with hot soapy water before and after using it.

Some people have trouble with dandruff, which is when the skin on your head is very dry. Dandruff consists of small flakes of dead skin, and some people who have a lot of dandruff use special medicated shampoos to stop the dandruff.

Simple, regular bathing is good care for the other hair on your body—the hair in your armpits and the pubic hair around the genitals. As you read in Chapter 2, these hairs serve a good purpose—they keep sweat and dirt away from your skin. In some parts of Africa, however, people remove some of these hairs. For example, some people feel the genitals look nicer without hair. Others think it is better for hygiene.

**Magreth, 18, Tanzania**

“When I was in standard 6, I started to grow pubic hair. My mother told me that if they grow long, I must trim them and wash very well, otherwise I will smell.”

**Lois, 13, Tanzania**

“I have seen hairs in my armpits. It is not long since I saw this hair so I have not trimmed it yet.”

If your culture discourages pubic hair, merely trim it with scissors. Do not take it off completely by using hair-removing creams or by shaving. Hair-removing creams will irritate and hurt the delicate skin in the pubic area. Shaving also has risks. If you shave your pubic hair, you are likely to make some very small cuts in the skin. If you have sex, these cuts are like open doors for HIV to pass through. That is dangerous. The other problem with shaved pubic hair is that, when it grows back, the hairs are so sharp that they can pierce a condom. Thirdly, the naked pubic area also tends to get little infections around the hair follicles or the base of where the hair should be growing. Trimming the hairs a little bit is safe, but be careful and don’t take all the hair off.

**EATING WELL**

Good nutrition is essential for good health. Eating a nutritious and balanced diet is important throughout life, but it is especially important during childhood and adolescence when your body is growing and developing very fast.

Your body needs good food to grow and to give you energy for doing well in school, playing sports and doing work. Sometimes young people don’t eat a nutritious diet and they forget to stick to regular meal times. They may skip meals and snack on biscuits, chips, sweets, chocolate and soda. These foods aren’t very nutritious, and your body needs a lot more to stay healthy.
Different types of food do different jobs in your body so you need to eat meals with each type of food. The basic types of food that your body needs in order to function well are:

- **“Go foods” or energy-giving foods:** “Go foods” include staple foods, such as ugali (or maize meal), fufu, cassava, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, bread, rice, plantains, millet and sorghum.

- **“Glow foods” or protective foods:** “Glow foods” contain important vitamins and minerals that your body needs to function properly and to glow with health. These vitamins and minerals are found in most vegetables, such as dark leafy vegetables (spinach, pumpkin leaves, cassava leaves), tomatoes, pumpkins and carrots. Most fruits, such as pawpaw (papaya), mangoes, oranges and pineapple also contain important vitamins.

- **“Grow foods” or body-building foods:** “Grow foods” contain protein, which is called the building block of the body. Protein helps your body to grow and develop properly, especially during adolescence. It also helps the body heal and repair itself when you get hurt. “Grow foods” include: groundnuts, peas, beans, cowpeas, meat, chicken, fresh fish, dried fish and snails. Eggs, milk, yoghurt and cheese also contain proteins. Many sources of protein—meat, fish, beans and peas, along with greens and dark leafy vegetables—are good sources of Iron as well. Iron is especially important for girls and women because they need extra iron when they are menstruating and when they are pregnant.

- **Fats, oils and sweets:** Fats are a source of energy. Some fats, such as groundnut oil, palm kernel oil, coconut oil come from plants, while others, such as butter or ghee come from animals. Because there is so much energy in fat, your body only needs small amounts of it. In fact, eating too much fat can cause some health problems in the long run. Another source of energy is sugar, but sweets can be bad for your teeth.

Think about your diet and whether you are getting all the basic food types. As shown in the illustration on page 51, the “go foods” should be the foundation of your diet, and you should eat the most of these foods. “Glow foods” are also very important, so eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. “Grow foods” are very important, but you don’t need as many servings each day. Lastly, it’s best to eat only a little bit of fats, oils and sweets.

**HOW MUCH ENERGY DOES YOUR BODY NEED?**

The energy you need depends on how much energy you use up. All the growth during adolescence takes up a lot of energy—in fact an adolescent needs more energy than most adults.

Energy is measured in calories. If you eat more energy or calories than your body needs during the day, the extra calories will be turned into fat and your body will store this fat for a time when it is needed. For most people this store of fat is healthy and normal. But it can be a problem if you have too much fat. Some people—especially people who eat too much food with many calories (fatty and sweet foods) and who do not exercise—get too fat.
In some African cities, there are more and more girls and boys who are heavier than they should be. This is partly because it is harder to take exercise in the city. It is also because a lot of fried food is eaten in the cities. Fried food can be easy and quick to prepare—it can be prepared much more quickly than traditional dishes, such as beans and stews. Even though fried food can taste good and can be prepared quickly, it is not very healthy. A diet of fried food can make people too fat, and, over the long run, it can damage the heart and blood vessels.

Try to avoid eating fatty and fried foods, as well as sugary foods and drinks.

**EXERCISE**

Everyone needs exercise: children, adolescents, adults—girls as well as boys. Exercise makes you beautiful: shiny, shapely and bright-eyed. It makes you stronger because it strengthens your heart and lungs, builds your muscles and thickens your bones. It makes you better able to resist disease by boosting your immune system.

**Nfune, 13, Zambia**

“I stay healthy by having a balanced diet and doing a lot of exercises.”
Exercise has some other benefits. It improves your mood. It builds your self-confidence. It makes you feel good. If you are feeling stressed, moody or sad, go for a fast walk or play a game of pick-up football. Do some sit-ups. Play netball. Ride a bicycle. Skip rope. Go for a swim. Play volleyball or table tennis. Anything that gets your heart pounding will lift your spirits.

Exercise can also be a good way to work on some important life skills, like confidence, co-ordination and teamwork. Many people first learn these skills when they are playing sports or when they join a team.

Getting plenty of exercise doesn't mean that you have to join a sports club. Even helping with work on the farm, in the garden or around the house can be good exercise. Making yourself useful at home can at the same time improve your relationship with your parents.

Some people are very athletic while others are not. Some people just have a special talent for football, for running fast or for swimming well, just as some people are especially good in math or in learning languages. Even if you don't think you are athletic, you should get plenty of exercise. Everyone has a body that needs using, stretching, pushing, and testing. You may find as you exercise that you enjoy it more and more. You might even turn yourself into an athlete before you know it!

If you are not used to exercising, it can be difficult at first. You may find that you get out of breath when you run. It may feel unpleasant and put you off taking exercise. So, start gradually. Find an activity you like and build up your strength so you can do more and more. The aim should be to get your heart pounding, to feel that you are breathing faster than normal, and to get warm. Try to do this for at least 20 minutes, 3 times a week.

Keep up your exercise routine and see what happens. Your skin will get brighter. Your eyes will glow. You will feel happier and calmer. You will be more confident and able to handle difficulties. And of course you will be stronger and healthier too. So keep it up! Don't let exam time stop you from exercising. It is at exam time that you need exercise most.
Ruvimbo, 13, Zimbabwe
“I ride my bicycle to keep myself busy and for health reasons. Teenagers should occupy themselves; the world has a lot to offer.”

Godfrey, 19, Zimbabwe
“I love sports. I play basketball to keep my body fit.”

Good posture also comes along with exercise. Poor posture leads to aches and pain in the chest and back.

GOOD REST

Along with good food and plenty of exercise, you need to rest enough. Resting allows the body to store up more energy. Rest can be in the form of physical relaxation or sleeping.

Take time to relax each day by reading a book, doing something you enjoy, listening to the radio, or simply reflecting on your life. In small quantities, television can be relaxing, but don’t spend too much time watching the television or videos.

Sleep is an especially important form of rest. Only when you are asleep does your heart slow down and your muscles relax. This allows your body to recover and repair itself from any stresses or injuries. You need a lot of sleep during adolescence because your body uses up a lot of energy. Most people need about 8 hours of sleep every night. Some people need less, and some people need more. If you are tired all the time, make sure that you are going to bed early enough. All the changes your body is going through are very demanding, so make sure you give it a chance to rest!
Chapter 5
Basic Body Care

There are a few simple and basic things you need to know about taking good care of your body.

• As you reach puberty, you will start to perspire more. Bathing will keep you clean and smelling nice.

• Clean your teeth at least twice a day to avoid tooth decay (cavities) and to have nice breath.

• If your oil glands produce too much sebum (an oily substance), you may develop pimples. Pimples are a normal part of adolescence, and there is no way to avoid them altogether. Keeping your skin clean with water and a mild bathing soap is the best solution. But do not wash your skin too much, and do not use strong laundry soaps because this will damage your skin.

• Eat a nutritious diet full of “go foods,” “glow foods” and “grow foods.” Avoid eating too many sweets and fried foods.

• Get plenty of exercise. Exercise strengthens your heart, lungs and muscles, keeps you fit and lifts your spirits.

• All the changes you are going through are very demanding, so give your body a chance to rest—around 8 hours per night.

By practising good hygiene, eating well, exercising properly and resting, you will allow your body to function at its best. You will feel good physically, which will also help you feel good emotionally.
Taking care of your heart and head

This chapter is about your emotional health. Emotional health is a package of many things: loving yourself, feeling confident about your abilities, coping with worry, stress and sadness, and getting along with other people. Being emotionally healthy means feeling good about yourself. It also means having the inner strength to cope with life's ups and downs.

Doctors do not know why one person is emotionally healthy while another person is not. It is probably a mixture of your in-born personality and the way you were treated as a little child. Being emotionally healthy is also affected by your own attitude—are you willing to work on being emotionally healthy?

Everyone can work on being emotionally healthy. This means working on your self-esteem and self-confidence. It also means developing skills for coping with worries, stress and sadness. It also means working on your relationships with other people.

SELF-ESTEEM

The Oxford Dictionary defines “self-esteem” as “a good opinion of one's own character.” When you have high self-esteem, it means that you feel good about yourself. You know that you are a worthwhile person—someone worthy of love. You respect yourself. This is a very good feeling, and when you feel worthy of love and respect, you expect it from others.

Having high self-esteem does not mean that you never get upset or angry with yourself. Everyone gets frustrated with themselves at times. But someone with high self-esteem can accept his or her mistakes and move on.

High self-esteem is also different from pride or being too conceited. People with high self-esteem like themselves, but that doesn't mean that they think that they are perfect or are better than other people.
DO YOU KNOW what it means to be emotionally healthy?

Emotional health can be hard to describe, but you usually know it when you see it. Take Rose, for example. She seems happy most of the time, and she appears to be able to cope with life's ups and downs.

- If she gets a poor mark, she accepts it and works harder.
- When her boyfriend leaves her, she cries, but then decides that it's not the end of the world.
- At exam times, she doesn't get too stressed out. She takes exercise and talks to her best friend to handle stress.

Rose has high **self-esteem**. She isn't emotionally crushed when her boyfriend leaves her. She knows she's still a great person. She also has a lot of **self-confidence**. Yes, she did poorly on a test, but she knows she can do better. She doesn't have to blame the teacher. Her ways of coping with stress are good; sports and talking out problems with a trusted friend help her deal with the tension and move on.

But other people have a lot of trouble coping with life's normal ups and downs. For example, Emma, who is in the same situation deals with everything differently:

- She can't accept criticism and blames her teacher for a poor mark.
- When left by her boyfriend, she becomes depressed, spreads rumours about him, and starts flirting with other boys.
- When she feels stressed out, she starts drinking beer and smoking cigarettes.

Why does Emma have so much trouble coping with the same problems? One factor may be self-esteem. She is devastated when her boyfriend leaves her, and she copes with the pain by saying bad things about him. She tries to reassure herself that she's still desirable by rushing into the arms of another boy. Her way of coping with stress is not very effective; alcohol and cigarettes may help you forget about your problems, but they don't solve them.

Self-esteem is something deep inside you. But that does not mean that you cannot work on it or that you don't need to nurture and build it. You can work on your self-esteem on a daily basis. You can:

- Avoid constantly comparing yourself with others. Set your own goals, and don't judge yourself according to someone else's achievements. Life is a long race. Sometimes you will be ahead, sometimes behind.
- Recognise your special talents, and appreciate yourself the way you are. Make a list of the things you do well. Are you an artist, athlete, singer, storyteller or dancer? In what subjects do you excel at school?
• Think about the kind of person you are, and make a list of your best qualities. What do you like about yourself? Your generosity? Your sense of humour? Your creativity? Your ability to be a critical thinker?

• Be aware of the things you would like to improve about yourself, but don’t be horribly self-critical.

• Be realistic. Set yourself achievable goals so that you can be satisfied when you accomplish them.

• Believe in yourself. Tell yourself: “I can do it!”

• Spend time with people who care for you, make you feel good about yourself and boost your self-esteem. Stay away from people who damage your self-esteem, particularly if they do it on purpose!

Of course, working on your self-esteem won't mean that you will never have ups and downs, but it will help you get through them in one piece. Self-esteem protects you. When someone treats you poorly, your sense of self-esteem shouts: “Hey, this is wrong. Don't let this person treat you like this!”

Imagine that your friends have deserted you. They are teaming up and are leaving you out. Suddenly you feel shaky and unsure of yourself. Why don't they like you any more? Did you do something wrong? Your self-esteem starts to droop like a flower. You start to feel bad about yourself.

Some people panic in such circumstances. They look for an easy way to boost their dented self-esteem and to feel liked—even if this involves doing something that they think is wrong. For example, some young people who are rejected by old friends begin hanging out with a group of kids who drink, smoke and get into trouble. They too start taking drugs or drinking alcohol in order to feel accepted.

Acceptance feels nice and it gives you a boost, but it doesn’t solve your self-esteem problem, and it won't last long. You might feel better for a while, but soon a little voice inside you starts nagging: “These people are not serious. You are not being true to yourself. You are holding yourself back from doing the things you like and are good at. You don't feel very good about what you're doing....” That little voice is your conscience. It's always a good idea to listen to it.

Repairing your self-esteem will take more work than fitting in with a new crowd or numbing your unhappiness with a drink (see Chapter 12 for more on drugs and alcohol). However, it will serve you better in the long run. When you are going through a self-esteem crisis, here are a few more things you can do to get yourself through it:

• Try to put your immediate crisis into perspective. Try to remember that life is full of ups and downs and that this isn't the end of the world.
• Talk to someone you are close to about your problem and your feelings. Find a youth counsellor or someone who cares about you and who will be able to help you through this.

• Remind yourself that many people will value you for who you are. Find someone who can appreciate you—a new friend, a teacher, a sister or brother, a parent or another relative.

• Be patient. Self-esteem doesn’t recover overnight, but you will feel better about yourself soon.

SELF-CONFIDENCE

While you work on your self-esteem, you can also work on your **self-confidence**. Self-confidence is another key to emotional health. If self-esteem means feeling good and solid about your **character** and the **person** you are, self-confidence means feeling good about your **abilities**.

Self-confidence is great. People who are self-confident feel free to try new things without worrying too much about failure. They are not afraid to put themselves into new situations and among people they don’t know. They are not overly worried about what other people might think about them.

Self-confidence is very attractive. Self-confident people are often well-liked because they seem to be enjoying life to its fullest, as they take on new challenges and new experiences.

Self-confidence feeds on itself. In other words, self-confidence creates greater self-confidence. This means that the more you try new things, the more self-confident you get. This is for two reasons:

1. You learn that you can succeed at many things that you never even imagined you could.

2. You learn that even if you fail to do something, it is also okay!

When you are self-confident, you may sometimes fail, but more often than not, you will succeed. This is because when you fail at something, it is often because you are tense or anxious. When you are self-confident, however, you often sail through a new task. Anxiety and self-doubt aren’t making it difficult to concentrate on whatever you are trying to do.

Work on your self-confidence, and it will help you throughout your life. You can:

• Think of yourself as a competent person—someone who can achieve things.

• Give yourself challenges. Try new things and be open to new experiences. Practise saying to yourself: “I don’t know how to do that, but I certainly would like to try.”
DO YOU KNOW why girls have more problems with self-esteem and self-confidence than boys?

Sometimes girls have more problems with low self-esteem and low self-confidence than their male peers. Why is this? Are self-esteem and confidence determined by your sex—male or female?

The answer is No! Self-esteem and confidence are not determined by sex. However, a person's self-esteem and confidence can be greatly affected by how she or he is treated by other people—parents, siblings, relatives, teachers, neighbours, religious and community leaders, etc.

Unfortunately, in some cultures boys and girls are treated very differently, and this can greatly affect how they see themselves and their abilities. For example, in some families, boys may be given more opportunities for education and job training, and teachers sometimes pay more attention to boys. Girls, on the other hand, may not get the same opportunities. They may be pulled out of school. They may not be allowed to spend time playing with friends or playing sports as their brothers can. In addition, their hard work around the house and in the fields seems to go unnoticed and unappreciated. As a result, girls and women may feel less valued, and they may begin to believe that they are not worth as much as boys and men. But this is not true! All people are equal. If given the same opportunities, girls can do just as well as boys in school, jobs and anything else they want to do.

It can be very hard if you are a girl and live in an environment where you constantly feel as though you are not valued as much as a boy. Here are some things you can do to cope with this situation:

• Always remember that you are worth just as much—no matter what anybody else says. You are just as intelligent and capable as any boy.

• Work doubly hard on building your self-esteem and confidence.

• Rely on yourself for praise and satisfaction when you do something well. Don’t wait for praise from other people who are unlikely to give it.

• Take every opportunity you have to learn new skills and make the most of them. Remember, every time you succeed at something you will be proving to yourself and to others that you are worth just as much as anyone else.

• Be realistic about the challenges that face you, but don’t give up hope. If you live in a society where women are seriously under-valued, don’t expect this to change overnight, but don’t let it make you despair either.

• Talk to your parents or another caring adult. For example, if your parents are threatening to pull you out of school or to make you get married, try to find someone to talk to. Explain how important your education is to you and ask if they can help you cope with this situation.
• Have a sense of humour. Never let embarrassment or what other people think stop you from trying something.

• Look at obstacles as opportunities to experiment and learn something new. Think to yourself: “Okay, how can I deal with this problem?”

• If you fail at something, keep it in perspective. Don’t get too worried or upset about it. Think about what went wrong and what you could do differently next time. Then let it go.

DON’T WORRY, BE HAPPY!

Have you heard a song with that title? It has an easy catchy tune. But how easy is it to be happy? After all, everyone has worries, and adolescents have many worries—worries about themselves, their appearance, their friends, success in school, the future, etc.

Feeling very worried can be unpleasant. First, ask yourself if the worry is really worth worrying about. Many times people worry needlessly. There are many things that are not worth worrying about, such as:

• **Things that you cannot change**, such as your looks, the colour of your skin, texture of your hair, and the size of your breasts or penis. You cannot change these things, so it’s better to accept them as they are. You are beautiful and handsome in your own way. Besides, it’s your personality that makes you attractive to others. Focus on who you are, not what you look like.

• **Worldly things that are not within your means**. You see a beautiful dress in a shop. Don’t worry about having it because you simply can’t. It would take your father’s monthly salary to buy it! In addition, if you did get that dress, you would find that in a few months you wanted another dress even more. Worldly things don’t bring happiness or an end to worries, so focus on those things that are within your means. Be contented with yourself the way you are and with what you have.

• **Not having a girlfriend or boyfriend**: Some people find a girlfriend or a boyfriend during adolescence. But many do not find that special person until much later in life. In addition, many romances between teenagers do not last very long. It can take time to find your soul mate. Be patient and don’t rush into a relationship just because you think you should have a girlfriend or boyfriend by now.

• **Pressure from your peers to do something that you don’t want to do**: Do only those things that you think are good for you. Don’t ever let the desire to impress other people cause you to do things that you don’t want to do and think are wrong.
• **Being lonely:** Loneliness is something that everyone experiences at times throughout life. There will always be a few moments when you feel as though you have no one to talk to or no one who truly understands you. Usually these moments are short-lived, and everyone has them.

But of course some situations are worth worrying about. For example:

• **Your parents cannot afford your school fees, and you don't know where to turn for help.**
  This is a real problem, but one that many young people face. Talk to a teacher or to a counsellor at a local youth centre to see if they have any suggestions. Also, try talking to a religious leader or community leader to see if they know of anyone who can help you. Maybe you can switch to a cheaper school or get a weekend job to earn some money.

• **You and your girlfriend had unprotected sex, and now she thinks she might be pregnant.**
  This is a big worry. The best thing to do is to go to a clinic for a pregnancy test and for advice about what to do. Go with your girlfriend for support. If she is pregnant, don't deny that it is yours. You are equally responsible (see Chapter 11 for more on pregnancy).

• **You have heard a rumour that one of your ex-boyfriends or girlfriends has AIDS. You don't know if it is true, but should you get tested?**
  This is another big worry. Yes, go for counselling and a test so that you can put your mind at ease or take action as needed. Take someone with you for support (see Chapter 10 for more on HIV/AIDS).

• **An older man or a classmate has been giving you small gifts and treats, but now he wants you to have sex with him. He says you owe him for all the money he has spent on you.**
  Don't give into the pressure. You might end up getting pregnant by mistake and having the man or boy leave you. Stay away from him. Find the courage to talk to your parents, an auntie or some other adult about this difficult situation. Don't try to cope with it all alone.

In serious situations like these, worrying does serve a purpose. You need to think very hard about all the options you have for coping with the problem. Then you need to weigh all your options and the possible consequences of each one so you can pick the best course of action.

However, worrying about serious situations like these can add up to stress, which is when you start to feel overwhelmed by your problems and worries. When you are feeling stressed, your body will give you signals: you cannot stop thinking about the problem. Your heart may pound. You may feel short of breath. You may have stomach aches. You may have trouble sleeping at night or you may have nightmares (bad dreams at night). You may become very forgetful. If you are experiencing these signs of stress, take action:
• **Take a deep breath.** If you are feeling so stressed that you feel short of breath and light-headed, stop what you are doing, and slowly take several deep breaths, holding air in your lungs for a few seconds before you exhale.

• **Look for the source of stress.** Can you reduce it? Are you feeling stressed about something that you shouldn't worry so much about? Make a list of all the things that are making you feel stressed, and then look at it carefully. Have you taken on too much—too many responsibilities? Is there something you can take off your list?

• **Talk to someone.** You don't have to solve your problems alone. Other people have been through difficult times, and they may have new insights into your problem. Find someone you trust—someone who will understand your problem. This could be a parent, an aunt or uncle, an older brother or sister, a close friend, a teacher, a neighbour, a health worker, a youth counsellor, a religious leader or a community elder. These are just a few people who may be able to give you advice. They may be able to suggest a solution you had not even thought of.

• **Take some exercise.** Run, play football or netball, or take a brisk walk. Go swimming. Exercise is an excellent way to cope with stress.

• **Get enough sleep.** Try to go to bed in a good frame of mind. Avoid watching television right before bed. Try to relax all your muscles one by one as you lie in bed.

• **Eat healthy food.** Always eat breakfast, and avoid skipping meals.

• **Use prayer or meditation** as a way to calm yourself and cope with your stress. Prayers are full of wisdom about how to manage one's every day life.

• **Do something you really enjoy**—something that will help you take your mind off your worries, like spending time with a close friend, drawing, singing, gardening, cooking, listening to music, etc.

There are a few ways of coping with stress that you should avoid. These include:

• Using alcohol or drugs as a relief. This is no cure. Alcohol and drugs relax those parts of your brain that help you think clearly and control your behaviour. Drugs and alcohol can lead you to do things that you might later regret.

• Bottling up your feelings. Holding all your anxieties inside you won't help you cope with them, and it won't make your stress disappear. You will eventually feel like exploding.

• Taking out your stress on other people. Don't let your stress drive you to the point of being rude, hostile or nasty to other people. This will only make you feel worse about yourself.
These ways of coping with stress are not healthy, and they do not work. They will complicate your life even more, and they may give you something even worse to feel stressed about. Stress is something you can control, so don't let it control you!

COPING WITH SADNESS

Sometimes problems can make you feel down, and no amount of trying to get a positive angle on life, to eat fruit and vegetables, to play sports, and to get enough sleep makes you feel better.

Sometimes you have every reason to feel sad. For example, if you have experienced the death of someone close to you, it can be very sad. You may miss the person terribly and feel an enormous sense of grief. If you have lost your boyfriend or girlfriend, you may feel very lonely, and you may wonder if you will ever be close to anyone again.

Losses like these are very hard, but you can get through them. After a period of grieving, you will feel ready to move on. Even though the sadness of losing someone you love will always be with you, eventually you will become happy again.

But sometimes people start to have very deep sad and negative feelings about life. They may feel as though nothing in their life has meaning. There seems to be nothing worth living for. They feel empty and extremely hopeless. They feel dull. They feel that they've lost direction.

These feelings of extreme sadness and hopelessness are called depression. Depression can be triggered by a sad event like a death, but often people who are feeling depressed have a hard time identifying one specific reason or cause. As a result, they may have trouble realising that they are depressed. They might notice a range of changes in themselves, such as:

• Feeling sad most of the time.
• Lack of energy.
• Difficulty sleeping, or sleeping too much (sometimes depression makes it hard for people to even get out of bed).
• Difficulty thinking clearly.
• Constant headaches and stomach problems.
• Inability to enjoy activities that were once pleasurable.
• A change in their eating habits (such as eating more sweets) or drinking habits (drinking alcohol to try to forget about problems).

Have you ever felt this way or have you ever noticed these changes in a friend? Being depressed is serious, so whether it is you or a friend who is feeling sad, take action:

• Try to identify what is making you feel sad.
• Talk to other people about your feelings and what is making you feel sad.
• Take exercise, and do things that give you pleasure and make you feel good about yourself.

In addition to these things, try to be more outgoing and to spend time with other people. Get involved in your church or mosque or a youth group. Spending time with others can help you get your mind off the things that are making you feel so sad. Helping others can also be a good way to make yourself feel better. Try helping a young child who is learning to read. Help a friend or neighbour with their chores. It sounds silly, but you might be amazed how helping someone else can make you feel a lot better about yourself and the problems you are facing.

If these things don't help, however, or if you are feeling so sad and hopeless that you have thoughts of suicide (killing yourself), please find someone to talk to right away—a relative, teacher, or a professional counsellor. Many pastors and religious leaders are very good counsellors, and they offer support and advice to people all the time. There are solutions to your problems, so don't try to cope all by yourself when you are feeling seriously depressed.

**DID YOU KNOW** that alcohol makes depression worse?

Many people begin drinking more when they are feeling depressed, largely because it helps them forget about their troubles. Alcohol seems to numb the brain and to make problems less immediate.

Unfortunately, however, alcohol isn't a good way to cope with feelings of sadness and depression. In fact, alcohol falls in a category of drugs that are called “depressants” because it slows down the brain and other organs in the body. Alcohol and other depressants actually make depression worse. In addition, they simply help someone avoid coping with the problem that is making them depressed. As a result, alcohol can become a crutch when problems arise. People can become so addicted to alcohol that they cannot face life without it.

**GETTING ALONG WITH OTHER PEOPLE**

Getting along with other people is another important part of emotional health. Good relationships with your parents and friends will help you feel good about yourself in general, and they help you cope with life's ups and downs. Getting along with other people involves many important skills, such as:
Self-awareness: Being self-aware means being able to recognise what you are feeling and why. Being self-aware means that when you are feeling out-of-sorts, you stop to work out what you are feeling—sadness, anger, frustration, anxiety, etc.—and then you take some time to work out what is making you feel this way. Are you anxious about your studies? Are you worried about a friendship that seems to be fading? Has someone made you feel bad about yourself?

Self-awareness is important because it helps you understand what the problem is and what has caused it. With this information you can begin working to solve the problem. If you are feeling anxious about your schoolwork, you can talk to your parents or your teacher and begin getting the help you need to feel confident again. If you are worried about a friendship, you can take steps to talk to your friend about how important the friendship is, and together you can figure out how to make it strong again. If someone is making you feel bad about yourself, you can decide to either confront them to let them know that you feel bad when they treat you a certain way. Or, if that doesn't help, you can decide to try to stay away from that person who makes you feel bad.

Lastly, self-awareness can help you recognise your own short-comings—those weaknesses you need to work on yourself. Do you have any habits or tendencies that you would like to change? Or, maybe, you have noticed that when you do poorly on an exam at school, you tend to blame someone else. “The teacher doesn’t like me,” you tell yourself. Or you think: “Other students were making a lot of noise, and I couldn’t focus.”

Blaming other people is an easy habit to get into, but it is a bad one because you aren’t being honest with yourself, and you aren’t taking responsibility for yourself. Maybe when you were a child, it was okay to blame others, especially as there are so many things that children simply cannot control. But, as you enter adulthood, you need to take responsibility for your actions. If something doesn’t work out the way you want, it’s up to you to try to change it! Feeling sorry for yourself and acting as though you are the victim of other people’s actions won’t solve anything.

Empathy: Empathy is like self-awareness, except that it is the ability to understand what someone else is feeling and why. Being empathetic means that you have the ability to imagine yourself in the shoes of someone else—a friend, a parent, a relative, etc. You can understand their concerns, worries, fears and needs, and you can understand how they feel. Just as self-awareness helps you know what you need, empathy can help you understand what someone else needs. For example, if a friend is feeling sad, putting yourself in his or her shoes can help you know how to help.
Problem-solving and creative thinking:
Finding good solutions to difficult problems requires creative thinking. Creative thinking is the ability to think of possible solutions that aren't obvious. It is the ability to brainstorm all the possible ways to handle a problem, rather than limit yourself to what you have seen other people do.

For example, imagine that you became pregnant while you were still in school. All the other girls you know who became pregnant left school and never finished their education. Creative thinking means not assuming that you must end your education simply because you've seen that happen to other girls. Maybe you can stay in school during the pregnancy. Or perhaps you can return to school after you have had the baby. Maybe there is a centre for teenage mothers where you can continue your studies or training. Creative thinking involves talking to other people (teachers, youth counsellors, parents, aunts, uncles, friends) and exploring all the options that might be open to you.

Negotiation skills: These skills that you need to work out a problem or a difference with someone else. For example, you may want to go out with friends, but your parents want you to stay at home. This kind of situation requires good negotiation skills. Negotiating can be very hard work, and it can be frustrating at times. You might feel ready to explode or to yell. You might become so frustrated that you want to just say “Forget it!” and walk away feeling angry and fed up. But you need to be patient and calm as you explain why you feel the way you do, and what you need. You also need to be fair, understanding and respectful of what other people feel and need.

DO YOU KNOW how to resolve a problem creatively and assertively?

Anne, 16, is an orphan. She lives with an aunt who wants her to work in her shop every day after school. This is a big problem for Anne. She doesn't get enough time to study. She's beginning to feel very stressed because her exams are drawing near. She is having trouble sleeping at night because she is so worried about her studies. She starts to feel upset at her aunt. She wonders if her aunt sees her simply as a source of labour and doesn't love her or care about her future.

Anne is very self-aware. She knows that she has a tendency to bottle up her feelings until finally she explodes in anger. Usually this does not work very well. Her aunt gets cross and says that she is being disrespectful.

So this time she decides to do things differently. Instead of aggressively telling her aunt: “You don't love me!” she behaves assertively. She says calmly to her aunt: “I feel very worried about my exams. Yet at the same time I do want to help you in the store.”

Expressing herself in this way, Anne stands up for herself and for her own need for more time to study. But at the same time she is being understanding of her aunt's needs for help in the store. She shows empathy for her aunt, who has a lot of burdens.

Approached in such a manner, the aunt is understanding too. Together they think creatively to solve the problem. They find a schedule that gives Anne more time to study in the afternoons, but she still helps her aunt in the evenings when she needs it most.

It is amazing how good Anne feels. Suddenly she feels less stressed, and life seems manageable again.
Not every problem can be negotiated, however. Sometimes, you may have to focus on an outcome that keeps you safe, even if it doesn't make the other person happy. For example, suppose your girlfriend or boyfriend refuses to use a condom, no matter how hard you try to convince her or him. In this kind of situation, focus on keeping yourself safe. Walk away if you must.

**Assertiveness:** Assertiveness is an essential skill for getting along with others. Being assertive means standing up for yourself. To be assertive is to be straightforward and honest with yourself and with other people about what you need and want.

People who aren't assertive are often very passive and submissive. Even if they are being treated poorly, they don't stand up for themselves. People who are not assertive often lack the confidence and self-esteem to stand up for their own needs and to protect their feelings or body from being hurt.

Assertiveness is very different from being aggressive. People who are aggressive are rude and unkind. They don't care about other people's feelings. Being too aggressive isn't very good for your emotional health because, deep down, you will feel bad about being unkind.

Golden rules of assertiveness are:

- **Decide what you feel or want and say it.** Don't be afraid to be honest about your feelings. People should respect them. For example, maybe you felt uncomfortable and unhappy when your boyfriend touched your private parts. So you should tell him: “I felt unhappy when you touched my private parts. I don't want you to touch me like that anymore.” Someone who truly loves you will not want to do things that makes you feel unhappy.

- **Maintain eye contact.** Eye contact (looking someone in the eye) is an important part of being assertive. It tells the other person that you are serious about what you are saying and that you are paying close attention to whether or not they are listening to you. Eye contact is not encouraged in many cultures, and in some places it may be considered rude if a young person looks an elder directly in the eye. One way to deal with this is to follow traditional customs, such as kneeling, that show respect, while still maintaining eye contact when you need to be assertive.

- **Don't make excuses.** Your own feelings are the best reasons. For example, if you don't feel ready for sex, but your girlfriend or boyfriend is pressuring you, avoid using other people as excuses. Don't say: “My mum is about to come home, and I have a stomach ache, and I'm afraid of getting pregnant, and I'm very busy with books so it's not a good time.” You might confuse your friend with all these excuses. He or she might think that you want to go to another place on another day, or that you might want to use a condom. He or she might not realise that what you are really trying to say is: “I don't feel ready for sex so I do not want it now.” So, say what you really feel!

- **Don't seek the other person's approval.** If you don't want to do something, say so clearly and don't ask if it is okay. For example, if someone is pushing you to take alcohol or drugs, don't say: “I'd rather not, if it's okay with you...?” Instead, say: “No thanks. I don't want
any.” Show them that you know your own mind and aren’t looking for their approval.

- **Don’t get confused by the other person’s arguments. Keep repeating what you want or do not want.** Maybe your girlfriend keeps pressuring you, and she has all these arguments for why you should have sex. “Don’t you love me?” she asks. “But my old boyfriend had sex with me,” she says. Stand your ground, and don’t give in. Tell her: “I’m not your old boyfriend. I’m me. I don’t want to have sex.”

- **Remember that you have a right to change your mind.** Perhaps you and your boyfriend talked about sex a few days ago, and you told him that you would have sex with him. But you’ve had a couple of days to think it over, and now you feel sure that the time is not right—that you aren’t ready and that the relationship isn’t ready. He says: “But you agreed that we could have sex.” Tell him: “I’ve changed my mind. I’ve decided I don’t feel ready.” If he truly loves you, he will respect your right to change your mind, and he will wait until you feel ready.

The basic life skills discussed in this chapter—self esteem, self-confidence, coping with stress and sadness, self-awareness, empathy, problem-solving, negotiation skills and assertiveness—are some of the keys to good emotional health. If you master them, you’ll be able to stay safe, and you will probably succeed at many things you try in life.
Chapter 6
Taking care of your heart and your head

Being emotionally healthy means that you are able to:

- **Feel good about yourself.** You like and respect yourself. You have high self-esteem.
- **Feel good about your abilities.** You don't worry too much about failure, and you aren't afraid to try new things. You are self-confident.
- **Cope with worries and stress.** You don't worry needlessly about things such as the way you look, things you cannot afford, pressure from your peers, or not having a girlfriend or boyfriend.
- **Cope with sadness.** You don't let problems and sad events overwhelm you and make you feel completely hopeless.
- **Recognise what you are feeling and why.** You are self-aware. When you are feeling out-of-sorts, you stop to think about what you are feeling (sadness, anxiety, anger, frustration) and what is causing you to feel this way.
- **Understand what someone else is feeling and why.** You can put yourself in someone else's shoes and understand what his or her worries, fears and needs are. This ability to understand someone else's feelings is called empathy.
- **Solve problems and think creatively.** When you have a problem, you can think of a variety of ways to cope with the problem. You can find good solutions that aren't immediately obvious.
- **Explain to someone else what you want and why you feel the way you do.** When you are trying to resolve a problem or a difference of opinion, you can argue for what you want, while still being respectful of the other person's feelings and needs. You can try work out a solution that is good for both of you. You have good negotiation skills.
- **Assert yourself.** You can stand up for what you want and what you need. You are clear and honest about your own feelings. You don't allow yourself to be pressured into something you don't want to do.

Being emotionally healthy isn't something you can achieve all by yourself. There will be times when you will need to get advice and help from others—from a parent, friend, teacher, aunt, uncle, older sibling, religious leader or youth counsellor. An important part of being emotionally healthy is being able to ask for help when you need it.
Getting along with your parents

Some adolescents are blessed to have parents with whom they can easily get along and discuss important things. But many young people have trouble getting along with their parents during adolescence. Their relationship with their parents becomes more complicated. They start struggling and arguing about everything with their parents. They feel as though their parents are much too old-fashioned and traditional. They feel as though their parents don’t trust them or have confidence in them.

Gifty, 14, Ghana
“My parents are free and they share the problems with me so I do not disagree with them. They always make me feel happy and advise me a lot. I want parents to have time for their children. Parents should talk to their children and advise them a lot because it depends a lot on your parents for your dreams to come true.”

Cathy, 17, Uganda
“My mother’s strictness coincided with my body changes. She discouraged me against groups, yet it was the time when I needed them most, to share experiences.”

Panaito, 14, Kenya
“My parents sometimes prevent me from socialising with my fellow youths.”

Barlay, 16, Kenya
“Parents try to make us good but sometimes they are strict. They choose friends for us, and I do not like that.”
Halima, 14, Kenya

“My parents and I always disagree about going out without a buibui (black dress and headscarf worn by Muslim women), and now that I have finished my examinations, they don’t like me to go out all the time.”

Whether you are at one extreme or the other, there’s a lot you can do to maintain and to improve your relationship with your parents. It can be hard work at times, but if you are serious and committed, your efforts will pay off. In addition, you’ll find getting along becomes easier and easier.

APPRECIATING YOUR FAMILY

Make a list of your best traits—the things about yourself that you like. Perhaps you think your sense of humour is one of your best features. Maybe you like your nice smile. Perhaps you feel good about your talent for carpentry or your quickness in mathematics.

Next, ask yourself where these traits and strengths came from. Where and from whom did you learn them? You might see some of these same traits in your parents, your aunts and uncles or other members of your family. Do you have your mother’s sense of humour? Your father’s nice smile? Who taught you all those things about carpentry?

Sometimes it’s easy to get so caught up in struggles with parents and other family members that you can’t really see how much they have given you. You have trouble seeing what you have in common because of all the differences of opinion between you. Sometimes you may even feel embarrassed by your family. Maybe your parents don’t have much money, so your family lives in a one-room house. You may feel ashamed to bring friends home.

It’s important to appreciate your family and to accept your family as it is—rich or poor. Focus on what your family has been able to give you, rather than what they couldn’t give you. Remember, your family has played a big part in shaping who you are and who you are going to be. Your family has also given you many of the values by which you will live your life.

Of course, this isn’t to say that you are exactly like your parents. There may be just as many differences between you as there are similarities. In addition, adolescence is often a time when young people want to explore the differences between them and their parents. They want to be more independent, which is perfectly normal and healthy. However, becoming more independent is not easy. In fact, it can be very hard—for you and for your family.

BEING UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR PARENTS’ VALUES AND BELIEFS

When you are trying out new identities, new looks, and new ways of being, your family can find it very hard. They might wonder what has possessed you. Where did you get these funny ideas? Where did their beloved son or daughter go? Who is this young person who only wants to spend time alone or out with friends?
It can be difficult for parents to recognise that you are becoming an adult who can think for himself or herself and who has his or her own opinions. They still think of you as a child. Be patient with them while they adjust to this big change in you.

Grace, 14, Kenya
“We disagree sometimes about clothing, because they say that trousers and jeans are for men. But I think wearing them is safer for me than dresses and skirts. They also do not like me plaits rastas. They say that the style is of bad people. As for me I don’t think so, I take it as a style.”

Bernard 17, Kenya
“Sometimes my ideas conflict with my parents.”

Remember that your parents grew up during a different time. Even if your parents seem too traditional, find something positive about it. Your parents are a link to your culture, and this is an important and very rich part of who you are. You can learn a lot about your culture from your parents and your elders. It would be sad to lose things like:

• Your local language or “mother tongue.”
• The history of your people.
• Traditional musical instruments, songs and stories.
• Traditional dances and cooking.

Imagine yourself without any of these things. Imagine if you did not know who your ancestors were. Who would you be? Where would you belong?

Without a sense of our culture and our history, we are lost. Our ancestors, their language, culture, and beliefs are an important part of our identity. Don’t under-value them!

Of course, modern culture has a lot that’s very good as well—things that make our lives better, like education, modern medicine, and new ideas about the roles of men and women. For example, girls today have many more opportunities for education and exciting careers than their grandmothers ever had. Old attitudes—like beliefs that women and girls should only stay at home to cook and take care of the house—are changing. Attitudes about traditional practices such as early marriage are also changing.

You are living during an exciting time. You are exposed to many ideas. You have many options in terms of how you want to live your life. You can choose the best of both worlds—the best of your traditional culture and the best of “modern” culture. You can embrace what you like and think is good, and you can reject those things that you think are bad.
As you try to make your own decisions about which traditional and modern customs you want to live by, try to be sensitive to the beliefs of your parents and elders. Talk to them to find out why they feel the way they do. Explain your own feelings and thoughts.

**COPING WITH YOUR PARENTS’ EXPECTATIONS**

Some parents expect a lot from their adolescents. They want you to lead a better life than they did, so they want you to work hard now, to do well in school, to get serious!

**Halima, 14, Kenya**

“Sometimes my parents put too much pressure on me. They expect me to do everything right and not to make any mistakes. They expect me to be perfect yet that cannot be possible, since we are all human beings who are liable to make mistakes all the time.”

Parents’ expectations can seem like a heavy burden. Sometimes it may seem as though they are so focused on the future they have dreamed up for you, that they aren’t listening to your own ideas on the subject.

Maybe your father has his heart set on your becoming a doctor, but you are not very strong in sciences. Or perhaps your mother expects you to marry and stay in the village where you were born, but you want to go on to university and be a journalist.

This type of situation can be very hard. Your parents often think they know what is best for you, even when they don’t. It can be hard for them to recognise that you are an independent person with your own talents, ideas and dreams. They may have a hard time recognising the differences between your dreams and the dreams they themselves have for you.

Try to be patient with them, and try to remember that they want your future to be a bright one. Keep talking to your parents. Tell them about your own goals and dreams, and why you want to pursue them. Show them how serious you are.

**COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR PARENTS**

Lack of open communication is the cause of many struggles between young people and their parents. Sitting down to have an honest discussion is surprisingly hard for everyone.
Julia, 22, Ghana
“When I started seeing changes in me, I found it difficult to talk to my parents about it. But as time went on I felt more relaxed and was able to talk to them. I asked them any questions I wanted to.”

Most parents want very much to help their children go through adolescence safely, but often they don’t know how. They’re afraid of embarrassing you, and they’re afraid of embarrassing themselves. Their own parents probably didn’t talk to them about adolescence and all the changes one goes through. Thus, it’s very hard for them to help you when they themselves did not get much help. Like you, they may not have much experience in this area, or any role models to draw upon.

How does one learn to talk openly with parents, aunties, uncles, grandparents or other family members? How do you build a relationship where they trust you? Especially if you have been arguing lately, how do you even start? Of course, there’s no simple answer, but here are tips you can try:

• **Show your parents that you care about pleasing them.** Volunteer to help your parents with something they are working on—in the kitchen, around the house or in the garden. While you are working together, bring up the issue you want to discuss.

Anthony, 15, Kenya
“The best way to approach your parents is when you have done some work that makes them happy and then you can go and talk to them about what you want.”

• **Choose a good time to talk.** Timing is everything! Choose a time when your parents are not too tired or busy. Maybe it is better to wait until the weekend when they are feeling more relaxed and less worried about work.

• **Start with easy topics.** Start with topics that aren’t too embarrassing to you or to them and about which you don’t disagree strongly. In many families, parents and their children only start talking to each when it’s something serious—like when the children want to do something the parents don’t like. This is a hard place to start.

You can first try talking to your parents about a friend’s situation or problem, rather than your own. This can give both you and your parents a sense of each other’s values and can
help build trust and understanding about a situation that is not too personal. But don't betray your friend's trust, and do protect his or her privacy. For example, you can talk to your parents about the friend's problem, but don't name the friend who is in this difficult situation.

- **Show your parents that you do care about their views.** Ask them what they think and why they feel a certain way. Try to understand their perspective and their concerns. Perhaps you think your parents don't want you going to discos simply because they are strict. But maybe they know something about the discos that you don't. Perhaps they have heard of girls being raped there or that people are pushing drugs there. They may have some very good reasons for feeling the way they do. Show them that you are interested in their reasons and care about what they think.

- **Be respectful.** Your parents and your other older relatives care a lot about respect. So even if you feel frustrated, try not to shout or make them feel you are being disrespectful. Also, be respectful of their values. While many of your values may be similar to those of your family, some may be different. If you want to live by different values than those of your parents, that is fine, but don't criticise your parents for their beliefs—even if they seem too old-fashioned or traditional to you.

- **Earn their trust.** Show your parents that you are responsible and that they can trust you. If they tell you to be home by a certain time, make sure that you are home by then. Be open with them about what you want to do and why. Don't try to sneak off to a disco when you've told your parents that you are going to a friend's house. If you try to deceive them, they will probably find out and will feel as though you have broken their trust.

Your parents need to respect your privacy, but you should not abuse it by living a secret and risky life. Your parents also need to respect your choice of friends, but in return, you need to show them that you can choose friends well. Don't hang out with people who don't care about you and whose values fundamentally oppose those of your family.

_Aloysious, 19, Uganda_

“You should do what you are told even if you dislike it, and don’t give them stress by doing things that you know will hurt them dearly. By doing all these when you talk to them they will not refuse anything you tell them.”
• **Be open with your parents.** Remember, you are changing so fast that your parents may feel as though they hardly know you. It is your responsibility to make sure that they do! Talk to them about your dreams, your expectations and your needs so that they feel confident that they know you and what you want. Share your concerns and worries with them, and ask them what they would do in your situation. Let your parents meet your friends so they know whom you are going out with.

When your parents feel as though they know you well, they will feel better able to trust you. It will help them begin to accept you as the adult you are becoming and to stop treating you as a child. It will help them feel comfortable allowing you to make more and more decisions on your own.

**Prisca, 14, Kenya**

“The best way to approach our parents is by telling them of our problems and asking them if they can help. If you ask them, they can’t refuse because they are loving and understanding. You can plan a day and sit together with them and share the things you want to say because they can’t refuse.”

• **Show your parents you care about them.** Just as you want them to show you that they love you, show your parents that you care about them. Do nice things for them to show them that you love them and want to please them.

**Sherifan, 15, Ghana**

“You should sometimes buy gifts for your parents. It really makes them happy.”

Getting along well with your parents and coping with their strictness, their protectiveness, their big expectations and their traditional values can be hard. It will take time and patience. But it will be worth every minute and every bit of effort you put into it. It will be worth it because there will be times when your friends and peers cannot advise you as well as your parents can.

**Gifty, 14, Ghana**

“You should respect your parents and put shyness aside. You should tell your parents your problems because they are the best people to have answers to your troubles and problems. Talk to your parents often.”
Jennifer, 17, Ghana
“You should help them in the house in every thing they do. In helping in all these things the love between you and your parents will be long.”

WHEN YOU NEED OTHER SOURCES OF HELP
Sometimes the difference of opinion between you and your parents can be too big. You have tried talking with them yourself, but it didn’t work. They aren’t listening to you, and the matter is serious. For example, supposing your parents told you that they want to pull you out of school and marry you off to an older man. You have tried to explain to them how important your schooling is to you. You have told them about your dreams of becoming a teacher, but they haven’t heard you.

There are many difficult situations like this, which you can’t manage alone. You need to find an adult who can help you.

Evans, 16, Kenya
“If you cannot talk to your parents to resolve a problem or argument, you should talk to a close relative, a person like your aunt or uncle who will advise you and know what is good for you.”

Try talking to another kind and caring adult you trust—someone who understands you, like a relative, an adult brother or sister, a teacher, a family friend, the parent of a close friend, a religious leader, or a social worker. Ask someone to advise you and to help you by talking to your parents about the matter.

Even if you aren’t having a serious problem with your parents, but just want advice, you may sometimes find that it is easier to talk to an aunt, uncle or another relative. There are many people who care about you and who will be happy to help you if you ask them.
Chapter 7

Getting along with your parents

Adolescence is a time when many young people and their parents have trouble getting along. But it doesn't always have to be this way. There’s a lot you can do to improve your relationship with your parents:

• **Appreciate your family.** Accept your family as it is—rich or poor. Spend some time thinking about what your family has given you, such as your personal strengths, your values and other things you like about yourself. Don't simply focus on what they have not been able to give you.

• **Be understanding of your parents’ beliefs and values.** Your parents grew up in a different time. Even if you feel that your parents are too traditional, find something positive about it. Learn from them about your history, traditional customs, music and language.

• **Remember that your parents want the best for you.** Coping with parents' expectations can be hard, especially when their dreams for you and your own dreams are not the same. Talk to your parents about your goals and why you want to pursue them. Show them you are serious and hardworking.

• **Be honest and open with your parents.** Look for good opportunities to talk to your parents. Give them a chance to get to know the adult you are becoming. Show them that you are trust-worthy and responsible.

• **Show your parents that you care about their feelings and want to please them.** Ask your parents why they feel the way they do. Try to understand their concerns. Show them that you are interested in and care about what they think.

• **Be respectful.** Even if you and your parents disagree, try not to shout at or be rude to them.

• **Be patient with your parents.** Give them time to get used to the fact that you are becoming an adult who has opinions and who can think for herself or himself.

• **Be patient with yourself.** Building a more open and close relationship with your parents takes time and hard work. Don't get frustrated or discouraged if it does not happen overnight.

Sometimes, the differences of opinion between you and your parents can be too big. Find a caring adult you trust—an aunt or uncle, older sibling, family friend, teacher, religious leader or social worker—and ask for advice. Perhaps they can help you resolve the problem with your parents.
This chapter is about friendships and love. Everyone needs good friendships, and everyone needs to feel loved.

**FRIENDSHIPS**

Friends play a big role in shaping who we are. They make us laugh, and they make us feel happy. They introduce us to new things and to new ideas, broadening our horizons. They share our dreams and try to help us plan out our futures.

Our friends also answer many of our questions during adolescence, and they help us feel comfortable with all the changes we are going through. When we’re in trouble, they encourage us and help us with our problems. They help reassure us about ourselves.

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**Naana, 17, Ghana**

“Most of my friends began noticing the changes in their bodies around the same time I did so I wasn’t very worried about them. We discussed the changes, and I found out that we had the same problems.”

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**Grace, 14, Kenya**

“My friends are good. We respect each other and love each other like brothers and sisters. They like me the way I am, and if I do anything wrong, they come openly and tell me the way I am to do it. Some think it is bad to have a friend of the opposite sex but it is good because they understand and we can seek advice from them.”
Gifty, 14, Ghana
“My friends like and respect me a lot because I am honest and I advise them about what is right for a girl to do.”

Seif, 13, Tanzania
“I have three girl friends. We just sit and talk or study together. A girl friend is just an ordinary friend.”

Evans, 16, Kenya
“My girl friend and I help each other with schoolwork and share ideas about life and how we should behave with big people.”

Halima, 14, Kenya
“To be friends with a boy or girl is to help one another and make decisions together. Also to talk if something is wrong.”

Boys and girls can be friends, and they can have a friendship without sex. Boys and girls can also have romantic relationships that don’t involve sex. Therefore the terms “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” don’t necessarily mean that the relationship is a sexual one.

Anthony, 15, Kenya
“Our friendship is not to play sex or do anything that we would regret in our future. Our friendship is to help each other as friends not anything else.”

Kwame, 17, Ghana
“People think a girlfriend is a person who you can relate with only sexually. A girlfriend is a person whom you can seek advice from, a person you can share problems with.”

A good, strong friendship is a wonderful thing. It makes you happy. It contributes to your emotional growth because it teaches you how to be close to someone.

Good friendships also contribute to your self-esteem. If you have a good friend, you feel good about yourself. It is nice to have someone to confide in, and it’s also nice to know that someone else feels comfortable confiding in you. You can bounce ideas off a good friend without being laughed at. You can share secrets and know they will be kept. It is nice to know that your friend will like and respect you even when you disagree about something.

Through a close friendship, you can learn how to agree and disagree. You learn how to be strong enough to have your own opinions. Being able to stand up for yourself and what you
believe is right is a life skill. It’s important for your future and for all your relationships with other people. In fact, friends help you build many important skills that you need to succeed in life—skills such as the abilities to:

- Communicate well and be open about your feelings and thoughts.
- Listen and understand someone else’s feelings and opinions.
- Be supportive when someone is in trouble or feeling down.
- Negotiate (for example when you and a friend disagree about something, you may have to negotiate some compromise or middle ground between you).
- Co-operate, work together and share responsibility.
- Accept and respect differences of opinion, beliefs and practices (for example, you and your friend may not always agree on everything, but that’s okay).

Friends start becoming especially important during adolescence because many young people feel shy talking to adults. If your parents think that spending your time with friends is a waste of your time, try to explain how important your friends are to you and why. You need friendships.

Good, strong friendships take time and effort to build. They don’t happen overnight. And you don’t find true friends every day.

**FINDING OUT SOMEONE ISN’T A TRUE FRIEND**

There may be times when someone you thought was a friend turns out not to be a good friend. For example, when a friend reveals your secret to others, or spreads nasty rumours about you, he or she is not acting as a friend should.

This can be very painful, but it is part of life. Try talking to the person and ask her or him to stop doing whatever it is that is upsetting you. If the friend doesn’t stop treating you badly, stay away from him or her. Losing a friend can be sad, but you will make other friendships—better ones.

**Ayoo, 15, Uganda**

“I lost most of my friends because they did not respect my opinions. Now I have only one true friend, but we respect each other.”

Friends can also be a source of pressure—specifically peer pressure, which is a big source of worry for parents. Peer pressure sometimes makes young people do things that are wrong, like take alcohol or drugs. Peer pressure can also make young people have sex when they don’t really want to do it.

**Florence, 16, Ghana**

“I feel pressure from other girls when they put up a good appearance and also when they go out for boys. I advise myself not to show any bad attitude or do bad things.”
In adolescence, it is very common for groups of adolescents to become friends, and there is pressure to do certain things or be a certain way if you want to join or stay in the group. Watch out for peer pressure! It is very powerful because you want to be liked and you want to be part of the group. You want to impress your group of friends, and you want to make sure that you aren't left behind.

Always keep a clear mind, and be true to yourself. Do not take risks just because you want to keep a set of friends.

Here's one more thing to remember: There may be times during adolescence when you feel as though you don't have close friends. This can make you feel very lonely, sad and anxious about yourself. Don't worry that there is something wrong with you. Maybe you are a little more mature than the other people your age. Maybe you want something different out of a friendship than your peers. As you grow older and meet new people, you will make wonderful, strong friendships. Be patient. It will happen!

**GETTING ALONG WITH THE OPPOSITE SEX**

For a lot of young people, getting along with the opposite sex is hard. They don't know how to treat each other respectfully and appropriately, and they don't know how to be themselves around the opposite sex. Here are some tips for boys:

- Don't stare or whistle at a girl because of her looks, dress or style of walking.
- Listen to what your girlfriend says, and take her “No” to mean “No.” Don't try to convince yourself that she means “Maybe” or “Yes” when she says “No.”
- Don't loiter near girls' toilets or block their path.
- Don't intentionally harass or scare girls at night or in lonely places.
- Don't start rumours about girls.

Girls can also have bad attitudes towards boys. Here are some tips on getting along with boys:

- Don't exploit boys for money and gifts.
- Accept that boys are also sensitive and have feelings too. Don't laugh at boys or make fun of them.
- Be straight with boys. Be clear about what you do or do not want. Say what you really think, and don't be afraid to express yourself. Be assertive! When you don't want to do something, say “No!” and stick to it.
• Don't start rumours about boys.

Girls and boys often end up in bad relationships because they don't have a good understanding of the opposite sex, and they find it hard to be friends. Boys often don't know what girls want from boys. Girls don't always know what boys want from girls either. Here are some tips:

• **Girls want love, care, trust and respect:** Girls get worried if boys do not respect them. They like boys who take time to listen to them and take them seriously.

• **Company:** Girls find that the company of boys is fun and exciting. They like boys who can support them when in trouble and with whom they can have fun and share jokes and laughter.

• **Freedom:** Girls want to be given a chance to think for themselves. They want boys who realise that girls have brains and like to use them.

• **Confident boys:** Girls admire boys who are confident and who are not afraid of girls.

• **Genuine boys:** Girls like boys who are themselves—boys who aren't always putting on a show, pretending to be somebody that they are not.

What do boys want? Most boys want the same things that girls want in a relationship:

• **Boys want love, care, trust and respect:** Most boys want to be with a girl who is caring and supportive—someone who listens, who takes them seriously and who respects them.

• **Company:** Everyone loves company. Boys, like girls, want someone with whom they can spend time, laugh, share stories, and talk about their ideas, dreams and goals.

• **Freedom:** Many boys feel a lot of pressure to act tough—to act as though they don't have emotions and feelings. They want someone with whom they can share their personal thoughts and feelings.

• **Confident girls:** Contrary to what many girls believe, boys like girls who are confident—girls who aren't afraid to express themselves freely.

• **Genuine girls:** Boys like girls who are real—girls who aren't trying to put on a show of being overly mature and sophisticated.

At the root of a good relationship is a strong friendship—not simply strong physical attraction or a sexual relationship. Neither person tries to control the other person or to pressure them into doing things. And neither person exploits or uses the other in any way.

A good and long-lasting relationship does not develop overnight. It takes time for two people to really get to know each other and to build a strong friendship.

**STARTING A RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMEONE YOU LIKE**

Adolescence is a time when you may begin feeling interested in and attracted to other people. You may see someone at your school who looks nice, and you think you'd like to be friends.
But you aren't sure how to begin. You don't know if she or he would like you or would even be interested in you. For all you know, she or he might never have noticed you!

Prisca, 14, Kenya
“The best way to approach a boy or girl is by approaching him/her in a polite way. The best way to start a friendship is by caring for your friend and helping each other in time of difficulties.”

Mercy, 16, Ghana
“The first thing to do to start a friendship is to be a friend to that person and when you get to know each other well, you can tell him or her what’s on your mind or heart by opening up your feelings.”

It's hard to approach someone new, especially when you are interested in them romantically. You may feel afraid to approach the girl or boy because you don't want to be rejected, and you don't want to have your feelings hurt. On the other hand, if you don't approach the person, you may never have any type of relationship with him or her at all.

There are two ways you can find out if someone likes you and is interested in you. You can talk to them yourself, or you can ask a friend to talk to them.

If you decide to have a friend approach the person you like, be careful to choose a good friend—someone who is completely trustworthy. You don't want to choose a friend who will end up telling other people that you like a particular person. You also don't want to choose a friend who will say too much to that person. For example, you might simply want your friend to mention your name to see if the person knows who you are and seems interested in you.

It's okay to ask a good friend to approach someone you like, but at some point, you are going to have to talk to the person yourself. This can be very hard. You might feel very shy. Your hands may feel wet with sweat. When you start speaking, you may completely forget what you meant to say. All these things are normal reactions to feeling nervous and excited.
Try to relax, and remind yourself that you are an attractive, fun and intelligent person. You have nothing to lose. Just be friendly towards the person you like. Start up conversations with her or him. Find out what she or he is interested in, and go out of your way to see her or him. If the girl or boy is friendly towards you, then take the next step: tell her or him that you would like to get to know each other better. Ask if she or he can go do something with you sometime.

BUILDING A STRONG RELATIONSHIP

There are many ways to get to know someone well and to develop a close friendship and good relationship. You can go for walks, go to festivals, go to the movies, or go for a drink and a snack together. You can play sports and you can get involved in community or religious activities together. You can study together. You can spend time together while you are with a group of friends.

If your goal is to get to know someone well and to develop a close, lasting relationship, doing a range of different activities together works much better than just having sex. In fact, having sex before your relationship is close and strong can ruin your relationship. Or it can make your relationship one that is only based on sex.

Remember, sex and love are two different things. Having sex does not necessarily mean that two people love each other.

Sherifan, 15, Ghana
“When you have sex, it does not mean you are in love. The person may be using you. He may be using you just because you are attractive, but not because he loves you.”

Harrison, 15, Ghana
“Sex and love are not the same thing. If you sleep with a girl it does not mean that the girl loves you.”

Many people think that sex will keep their relationship strong, but this is not true. Sex is not a good way to try to keep a relationship, and it can sometimes ruin a relationship.

Okakah, 17, Kenya
“One of my close friends told me that I would lose my girlfriend if I didn’t satisfy her sexually. Surely this made me very anxious so I started to experiment with her, even though she was not in the mood. This made me even more worried. Then I asked why she’s not in the mood. She explained that making love could cause unwanted pregnancy and if this happens, we would lose our dignity from the community. At the end we realised that lovers need to have mutual respect and understanding, and they need to ignore the pressure from other youth.”
Okakah’s friends told him that he’d lose his girlfriend if he didn’t have sex. But in fact, he almost lost his girlfriend by trying to have sex with her! What his friends were telling him was not true.

Remember, two people can have a very close relationship without having sex. By talking and sharing experiences, they can learn something more important about each other—how each person views life, how they would make decisions together, what kind of partner and parent each person would make, and how each feels about the other’s plans for life.

Before you have a sexual relationship with anyone, you should first be true friends. Sex without friendship will always be dangerous for your health and for your heart. You can get hurt. So for a healthy relationship and healthy sexuality—be true friends first!

**LOVE**

Love is difficult to define because it involves many different feelings. Love is a big thing, and there are different kinds of love—love for your parents and friends, love for your boyfriend or girlfriend, even love for your village!

Love is a complex emotion, and people may define love differently based on their own experiences with loving relationships. Generally, however, love refers to a deep feeling of fondness, attraction, respect, caring and understanding for another person, despite his or her weaknesses or faults.

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**Godfrey, 19, Zimbabwe**

“I can’t describe it. It’s wonderful to be in love.”

**Patrick, 16, Ghana**

“Love is the union of two people with the art of understanding each other and being faithful to each other.”

**Sherifan, 15, Ghana**

“Love is a thing that is between two people, either a boy or a girl. Love is sharing your problem and caring for each other.”

**Stabisile, 19, Zimbabwe**

“Falling in love is one of the best things in the world.”

**Jennifer, 17, Ghana**

“Love is you and your family and friends sharing ideas together. This is what I know about love.”
Falling in love can seem like magic. You meet someone special, and everything changes. The sun seems brighter, the grass greener, and you feel like you are walking on air.

Falling in love is different than making a new friend. When you fall in love, you may feel a warm, full feeling. You may feel like smiling all the time because the thought of your loved one makes you so happy. You want to be with this person all the time, and you daydream about him or her. In some cases, you may lose your appetite or have trouble sleeping at night.

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**Sherry, 19, Ghana**

“It is quite strange. You don’t know what comes over you. You can’t describe it. You try to get the person out of your mind but you realise it won’t go. You can be reading for exams but you notice that your mind is not following your eyes across the page.”

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**Sarah, 16, Uganda**

“I am 18 and there is a boy I love very much. When he is not near me, I fail to concentrate on anything. When he is with me, I tremble and cannot do anything sensible, even when he tells me to pretend he is not there. These feelings have me totally confused.”

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**Angela, 18, Kenya**

“It is exciting to be in love. You do not want to hurt him. You feel new as if something has been added into you. Sometimes reading becomes a problem. If he writes to you, you will read the letter for hours.”

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“First love” is one of life’s most intense experiences. Falling in love is not like anything you experienced as a child. It is something you should try to take slowly. Don’t rush into anything, and handle your heart and your loved one’s with care.

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**Diana, 17, Zambia**

“I think falling in love should come naturally rather than what is happening with most teens who go looking for love instead of letting love find them. People should look at each other in a positive way. Love can be handled by not pushing to do things that you would regret later.”
Cathy, 17, Uganda

“My feelings don’t develop so suddenly. This is because I always want to know the person I’m attracted to better. I show my feelings after I am satisfied that he is not after using me but after a real relationship.”

When you are truly in love with someone, you respect each other. You will never do anything that might hurt the other. You will never force the other person to do anything he or she does not want to do. You will want her or him to be happy. Check out your love against these points:

• Love makes you and your loved one feel good about yourselves and about each other.
• Love is honesty, caring and truthfulness.
• Love is respect and dignity.
• Love does not allow one person to take advantage of the other.
• Love does not put sex before friendship and is never a reason for unsafe sex.

True love involves a sense of responsibility and commitment to the other person. It is a feeling that seeks good things for the other person. Love is not irritable, impatient or touchy. It does not hold grudges. Some people think that jealousy is a sign of love, but it is not. Jealousy is usually a sign that a person is insecure and does not trust that you care about him or her.

Jealousy is not a sign that someone loves you. It is usually a sign of insecurity.

Sometimes, however, jealousy is a sign of a more serious problem. For example, jealousy is sometimes a sign that one person wants to control the other person. Many abusive relationships (men who beat their wives or men who rape their girlfriends) start out with jealous behaviour, which then gets worse.

HAVING CRUSHES

Sometimes, it is difficult to know if you are truly in love. Your heart pounds, and you feel breathless and dizzy at the sight of a certain boy or girl. You think it must be love. It’s over-
whelming! But when you get to know that boy or girl, the wild feelings suddenly disappear, and you no longer feel attracted to that person. That was infatuation or a crush.

Crushes are perfectly healthy and normal. In fact, most adolescents have crushes. Having a crush can be exciting, fun and risk-free. Many crushes never even turn into a relationship. You might have a crush on someone and not really want to have a relationship with him or her. You might simply enjoy admiring them from afar. That’s fine.

Naana, 17, Ghana
“I know that when you love someone you do what is best for the person and have that person’s best interest at heart, but I have never actually been in love. I can say I have had crushes on some boys, but I have never fallen in love.”

FALLING OUT OF LOVE

Love doesn’t always last. Feelings of being in love can disappear as quickly as they appear, but they can also be very real and powerful.

Sometimes, as you get older, you and your friend may find that you have drifted apart. Your dreams are taking each of you down different paths. You find that your interests have changed, and you don’t have much to talk about. You don’t laugh together the way you used to.

It isn’t good for your emotional health to stay in a relationship when you are no longer in love. This can be sad, and it can be very hard, especially if one person still feels in love, but the other no longer feels the same way.

If you decide to end a relationship, be honest about your reasons, but also be kind and considerate. Try not to hurt your friend’s feelings, but at the same time, make the end final—don’t leave your friend hoping or thinking that you will change your mind.

If your loved one breaks off the relationship with you, this is also very painful and difficult. It can be hard not to keep thinking that she or he will change her or his mind and come back to you. It may be hard to accept that she or he doesn’t love you any more. You may feel terribly lonely and rejected.

Give yourself time to cope with the pain. Do not rush into a new relationship with someone else to make yourself feel better. Even though you might feel angry and hurt, don’t blame the other person and never spread rumours or nasty stories about your ex-partner. These are not mature ways of handling your feelings.

Part of life is losing some friends and making new ones. Eventually, you will find the right person to love and to spend your life with, so be patient. In the meantime, focus on being a kind and loveable person. Liking yourself makes it easier to love others and to be loved.
Chapter 8
Friendships and love

Good friendships and relationships help you feel good about yourself. Good friends help you with your problems, introduce you to new ideas and share your dreams for the future.

Sometimes people you think are friends can pressure you to do something you don’t want to do, such as having sex or taking drugs. This is called peer pressure. Anyone who pressures you to do something you do not want to do is not a true friend. Don’t let anyone pressure you to do something that you know is wrong and risky for you.

Good friends can be people of the same sex or people of the opposite sex. Boys and girls can be good friends without having a sexual relationship. The words “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” do not necessarily mean that the relationship is a sexual one. Any two people can have a close and loving relationship without sex.

Getting along with the opposite sex can be hard because many boys and girls are not sure what the other wants in a relationship. Remember, most people—girls and boys—want the same thing in a relationship. They want respect, trust, honesty, understanding and caring.

If you want to approach a girl or boy you like, try to relax and be yourself. Be friendly. Go out of your way to see her or him. If the person seems to like your attentions, ask if you can go do something together.

Building a good relationship takes time and patience. Sex is not a good way to build a close relationship. In fact, sex can ruin a relationship. Having sex does not necessarily mean that two people love each other or that they are close. Sex without true friendship is dangerous for your health and your heart.

Falling in love is a wonderful feeling. It makes you feel good about yourself and the other person. Enjoy the feeling, and don’t rush into anything. Remember, love is about respect and caring for each other. Love is never a good reason to do anything that puts your health and future at risk. Love can’t excuse having unprotected sex.

Relationships don’t always last. If you fall out of love, it isn’t good to stay in the relationship. Be honest with your friend, but be kind and considerate too. Try not to hurt your friend’s feelings.

If someone ends a relationship with you, you may feel very sad and alone, but do not despair. You will find the right person to love some day. Give yourself time to cope with the loss. Do not rush into a new relationship, and do not spread nasty stories about the person.
Sexuality and sex

There is a great deal of confusion about sexuality and sex. Many people think that sexuality means sexual intercourse. People also think that you aren't a sexual being and don't have sexual feelings until you actually start having sexual intercourse.

But these beliefs are not true. Every person is a sexual being from birth until death. Being sexual can mean:

- Feeling attractive and good about your body.
- Feeling emotionally close to someone else.
- Enjoying being touched and hugged.
- Touching your own body.
- Feeling attracted to another person.
- Making up romantic stories in your head.
- Having sexy thoughts or feelings.

Adolescence is a time when you may become more aware of your sexuality—how you feel, think and behave as a male or a female, and what you want in terms of close relationships and physical affection. When you were younger, you probably did not think about these things, but during adolescence, you may become more aware of what it means to be a man or a woman. You also may start to feel attracted to other people and start noticing your own sexual feelings, desires and dreams.

DO YOU KNOW what is “sexuality” means?

Sexuality is complex. It’s much more than simply your sexual feelings or having sexual intercourse. Sexuality includes:

- Your awareness and feelings about your own body and other people's bodies;
- Your ability and need to be emotionally close to someone else;
- Your understanding of what it means to be female or male;
- Your feelings of sexual attraction to other people;
- Your physical capacity to reproduce.

Sexuality is an important, joyful and natural part of being a person. But sometimes people use their sexuality in unhealthy ways to influence, control or tease another person. This can range from flirtation and seduction to sexual harassment and abuse. Don't use your sexuality as a tool to get something or to tease or hurt someone else.
These are exciting changes, but they can also be confusing—especially because there are so many myths about sexuality and sex. For example, some people think that having sexual feelings is a sign that they should have sexual intercourse, but this is not true. Having sexual feelings is simply part of being human. Every person has sexual feelings.

This chapter is about sexuality and how people express their sexual feelings. There's a lot you need to know in order to make good decisions about sexuality and sex.

HEALTHY SEXUALITY

Being a sexually healthy person means that you can express your sexual feelings in ways that are not harmful to yourself or to anyone else. You don't take risks with your own feelings and health, and you don't take risks with other people's feelings and health.

As an adolescent, you can start working on being a sexually healthy person. You can make sure that you inform yourself as much as possible so that you know the difference between fact and fiction when it comes to sex. You can take time to learn about your body, your emotions, and how to be sexually safe and healthy.

Most importantly, you can take some time to think about your choices related to sexual activity. One of your choices can be “No sex” or “Not yet.” You can wait before you rush yourself into sexual intercourse. You can make sure you understand the consequences of unprotected sex and how to best protect yourself.

Sometimes it can be hard to be sexually healthy. No one ever teaches you in school or at home what healthy sexuality is. And your main sources of information—peers, older brothers and sisters, videos, music, and magazines—can be confusing and misleading.
In some videos and romance novels, sex seems to be romantic and problem-free. Sex looks like something that just happens—there's no discussion between the two people about whether they should have sex. They never discuss whether or not they should use condoms. And even though they don't use condoms, those people in videos and novels never seem to get into trouble with an unwanted pregnancy or with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) like HIV/AIDS.

In music, men and women sing desperately about love and sex. They never seem to worry about HIV or other problems. All they want is love. “My mind is telling me ‘no’, but my body is telling me ‘yes’,” goes one rap song. Another says: “I don’t know what you’ve done to me but it’s got me to act in such a crazy way.”

Music is beautiful, and it touches you deep inside. Videos and novels can be a great escape from your day-to-day life, but they don't help you handle your own relationships. They don't help you know how to talk to your girlfriend or boyfriend about whether or not to have sex. And they certainly don't help you talk to your partner about using condoms.

Even the people you know and love can also confuse you about sex and sexuality. Most parents don't want to talk about sex with their children, so it can be hard to learn much from them.

Gifty, 14, Ghana

“Why do our parents feel shy and difficult to educate us on sex? Is it because they think we will go and practise it or what?”

Many of your peers and friends may say that they have had sex even when they have not. You might start to think you should have sex to keep up with them. Your peers may also tell you myths such as: you need sex to cure menstrual pains or to make your penis get big and strong. But these things are not true. Having sex won't cure menstrual pains, and it won't make the penis bigger.

For many of you boys, your older brothers and uncles may have taken a lot of sexual risks that they regret deeply. But they still urge you to start sex to prove that you're a man.

For many of you girls, no one has ever told you that you are beautiful before, but now boys are telling you this, and it makes you feel good about yourself. Should you flirt with them and encourage them?

It can be hard to make sense out of all the messages you get about sex. However, an important part of healthy sexuality is being able to tell the difference between sexual behaviours that are healthy and those that are harmful to yourself or others. Before you act on your sexual feelings, think about the possible consequences of your actions. Will you or anyone else be put at risk for unwanted pregnancy, HIV/AIDS or other STIs? Will acting on your sexual feelings cause any other problems, such as misunderstandings or miscommunication in your relationship? Will it make you or your partner feel uncomfortable? Will anyone's feelings get hurt? Being sexually healthy means taking the time to think about these things before you act on your sexual feelings.
SEXUAL FEELINGS

You will know when you start to feel sexy or sexually aroused. You feel it in your body. In boys, the main sign of sexual feeling is erection of the penis. In girls, it is wetness of the vagina. This happens because extra blood from nearby blood vessels flows into the special spongy tissue inside the penis or vagina. In boys, the spongy tissue in the penis swells up, making the penis longer, harder, wider and erect. In girls, the spongy tissue swells up inside the walls of the vagina making them produce more vaginal discharge, which lubricates the area and makes it wet.

You might feel this sexual excitement just by reading a romantic novel or by thinking about a boy or girl you like. If you were actually with that boy or girl and you were touching each other, you would probably get even more excited.

What should you do about your sexual feelings? First of all, you don't need to have sex when you have sexual feelings. Sexual intercourse is only one way that people express sexual feelings. But there are plenty of other ways that people express these feelings—from talking to each other and holding hands to hugging, cuddling, kissing and touching each other.

These ways of expressing sexual feelings can be very sexy and satisfying—and they carry little risk of HIV infection (read Chapter 10 for more on HIV and other STIs). Your breathing and heartbeat may increase. Your whole body may feel very sensitive and stimulated. You can stay at this level of sexual excitement for hours. You do not have to go further. Boys, you do not need to tell girls that you have to have sex if you have an erection. It is simply not true. Your erection will go down when you stop cuddling the girl.

It is important to know that not all physical touching leads to sexual excitement. If a person is pushed unwillingly into sex, it will not feel nice. Sexual excitement only happens when people are feeling happy and relaxed (read Chapter 12 for more on sexual abuse and unwanted sexual activity).

MASTURBATION

Masturbation is the act of touching one's own sexual organs—the penis, vagina, breasts or other parts of the body that are sensitive to sexual stimulation. Masturbation is another way that people sometimes express their sexual feelings.

Both men and women can relieve sexual feelings and experience sexual pleasure through masturbation. In fact, most people masturbate sometime or other during their lives, but boys tend to masturbate more frequently than girls. Some girls and boys start masturbating when they are children and continue to do so all their lives. Some start during puberty; others start when they are adults. Other people never masturbate, and some people feel that having sexual fantasies and masturbating is in conflict with their religious or moral beliefs.
In some cultures, there are many myths that are meant to discourage people from masturbating. Here are some falsehoods about masturbation:

- Masturbating makes you insane.
- Masturbating makes you grow hair on the palms of your hands, causes pimples on your face or makes you go blind.
- Masturbating makes you pale and makes you use up all your sperm.
- Masturbation makes you weak and makes it impossible for a man to father children.
- Masturbation causes you to lose your desire for the opposite sex.
- Masturbation makes you become a proud and self-centred person.

None of these myths are true. From a medical point of view, masturbation is considered a normal part of development. It is normal if you do masturbate, and it is normal if you don’t. There is no scientific evidence that masturbation causes any physical or psychological harm.

Masturbation is only considered a problem when:

- It is excessive—the person cannot function or get through daily tasks without masturbating.
- It is done in public places where other people may see.

Experts in human sexuality consider masturbation one normal way for people to enjoy and express their sexuality without risking pregnancy or STIs, including HIV/AIDS. Nothing bad will happen to your body, even if you masturbate a lot. The only thing that can happen is that your genitals might get sore from rubbing them too much.
FEELING ATTRACTION TO SOMEONE OF THE SAME SEX

Adolescence is a time when many people become more aware of their sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is about whom a person feels sexually and romantically attracted to. Most people are attracted to people of the opposite sex (i.e., men are attracted to women, and women are attracted to men). Feelings of being attracted to the opposite sex are called heterosexual feelings.

Some people feel romantically and sexually attracted to people of the same sex—some men feel attracted to men and some women feel attracted to women. This attraction to the same sex is called homosexuality.

At some point in their lives, most people have sexual feelings, thoughts, dreams and attractions to someone of the same sex. Two close friends (either two boys or two girls) might have a crush on each other—they like being together and at times feel physically attracted to each other. Some people find these feelings confusing or upsetting, but they are normal, and many people experience such feelings at some time in their lives.

Some people remain attracted only to people of the same sex. Although some religions and cultures consider homosexuality to be wrong, abnormal and a habit that can be changed, most experts think that people's sexual orientation and feelings are not something they can control—any more than they can control the colour of their skin or the texture of their hair. In other words, homosexuality is probably not a deliberate choice that someone makes, and it cannot be changed through praying, will-power or having sex with someone of the opposite sex.

During adolescence, some people come to realise that they are homosexual. This realisation can be a difficult one. You may feel very different than everyone around you, and you may feel very alone. If you are going through something like this, try to find someone to talk to, such as a youth counsellor, a health worker, a teacher you trust, or an older family member—someone who will help answer your questions and ease your worries.

VIRGINITY

A virgin is a person who has not had sexual intercourse. Every boy and girl is born a virgin. Virginity is good protection against HIV and other STIs. These days, more and more boys and girls are choosing to keep their virginity until marriage.

Ruvimbo, 13, Zimbabwe

“I would like to keep my virginity. I’m not going to make love to anyone even with ‘protectors’. My boyfriend is cool that is why he is my man.”

Stabisile, 19, Zimbabwe

“I’m still a virgin. Maybe my strong religious beliefs play an important role in this.”
Susan, 18, Uganda

“Virginity gave me a sense of pride and respect. Young girls should keep their virginity until they feel they have found the right person. Sex is something you can always postpone. Avoid situations that will compromise your principles, and you can maintain it.”

Many people are confused about what makes a girl lose her virginity. They think that a girl’s virginity is determined by the hymen, which is a very thin piece of tissue inside the opening of the vagina. The hymen has some small holes in it, and it does not completely cover the opening because menstrual blood has to come out each month. Some girls have no hymen at all. They are either born without one or it gets stretched by sports and disappears completely.

Girls who have hymen tissue will sometimes bleed when they lose their virginity. Girls who have little or no hymen tissue may not bleed the first time they have sex. This confuses people. They say: “There was no blood, therefore she was not a virgin.” But she may have been. If she had not had sex before, she was a virgin. **Virginity is only lost through sexual intercourse.** It cannot be lost through sports, using a tampon, masturbation or any other activity. While it is true that these things could stretch or tear the hymen, this does not mean that the girl is not a virgin. People who think that the hymen is proof of virginity are mistaken.

**DO YOU KNOW the facts about virginity?**

There are many myths about virginity:

1. *I heard that a girl can lose her virginity through sports. Is this true?* No! Virginity can only be lost through sexual intercourse. Playing sports is good for girls, and it can’t possibly cause them to lose their virginity.
2. *Can some herbs restore a person’s virginity?* No herb can restore virginity. Once lost, it is lost forever.
3. *My friends say that if I remain a virgin too long, I will develop illnesses and abnormalities. Not true! You can stay a virgin all your life without bad effects.
4. *Is it true that if a girl stays a virgin too long, her hymen will harden and she will have problems with sex?* This is nonsense! The hymen is a thin piece of tissue. It does not harden with age, and waiting to have sex will never hurt you.
5. *You can tell virgins by the look on their faces.* False! You cannot tell a virgin from their looks. It is only a virgin who knows his/her status.
6. *After you have lost your virginity, you have to continue having sex. Not true. You can stop having sex whenever you want.
7. *I heard that you shouldn’t use a condom if you are having sex with a girl who is a virgin because it takes a lot of force to break a girl’s virginity—so much that you will break the condom. Is this true?* No! Boys and girls who are virgins can comfortably use condoms without any problem. The hymen is a very thin piece of tissue, which tears easily.
Like girls, boys can only lose their virginity by having sexual intercourse. Some people do not think it is as important for boys to be virgins as it is for girls. In addition, many of the videos you watch and the novels you read make it seem as though it’s important for men to be very sexually experienced. Sometimes it seems as though to be a real man, you have to be having sex. But having sex does not make you a man, and whether you are a boy or a girl, keeping your virginity is good. It’s the best protection against HIV, other STIs and unwanted pregnancy.

LOSING YOUR VIRGINITY

Whether you are a girl or a boy, you should be the one to decide when to lose your virginity. Don’t let other people decide for you or pressure you into it. You chose your time. And choose the right person. Wait until you are sure that you can always protect yourself against STIs, including HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancy.

Adam, 13, Uganda
“I think the right time for sex will be when I’m 20 years old. I shall finish my studies, and maybe work. Even when the time comes I will use condoms to avoid the risks involved.”

Nfune, 13, Zambia
“I would rather wait until I’m married or until I’m financially secure because if the girl gets pregnant she would need money to support the baby.”

Sometimes your peers may pressure you to have sex.

Douglas, 12, Zimbabwe
“Some boys who are older than we are or who are blessed with big bodies laugh at us saying we are virgins.”

Andrew, 17, Tanzania
“My boyfriends laugh at me and try to encourage me to have a girlfriend. They say that how can you live without a girlfriend, you are not a man!”

Mildred, 17, Uganda
“At times, you feel left out when your friends are talking about sex issues. You can only fit in the conversation, using what you read in novels and watched in movies. If you don’t have a positive attitude about yourself you can be misled. I have chosen to keep my virginity until I get a man good enough.”

Lois, 13, Tanzania
“I talk to my friends about having sex. There are some girls and boys who say that if you refuse to have sex you look like an uneducated person.”
Many adolescents today are very clear that having sex should be their own decision, and that no one should push them into sex.

**Patrick, 17, Uganda**

“All my friends are having sex with their girlfriends, and I almost gave in because of pressure from friends, but I realised I wasn’t sure and felt confused. Besides I want to do things my way. I will wait.”

**Lois, 13, Tanzania**

“Nobody can force me to have sex. It will be my own decision.”

**Milensu, 13, Zambia**

“I would not have sex because I have to wait until marriage when I will be ready for the sex consequences. I do not expect any of my friends to put pressure on me to have sex. The decision is mine.”

**Andrew, 17, Tanzania**

“If I want to have sex it will be my own will. My friends will not influence me.”

**SEXUAL INTERCOURSE**

Sexual intercourse is what most people think of as sex. Sexual intercourse is when a male and a female put their bodies close together and the male’s erect penis goes into the female’s vagina.

Why do people have sexual intercourse? There are many reasons—some good and some bad. Here are some reasons:

- **To be loving and intimate.** For two people who are very close, sex can be very intimate and loving. However, some people have sex because they think it will bring love and intimacy to their relationship. They think that having sex will prove that there is love between them. But this does not usually work. Intimacy comes from talking honestly and sharing emotions. Sex doesn’t bring two people closer together if they weren’t close to start with. And having sex does not mean that two people love each other.

- **To satisfy sexual feelings and the need for physical affection.** Some people think that you need to have sex to satisfy sexual feelings—just as you need to drink when you feel thirsty. But sex doesn’t always work that way. In fact, sometimes having sex is less satisfying than
holding hands, cuddling and kissing. If the two people are not in a close relationship, having sex can be very unsatisfying.

- To try to keep a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Many people have sex because they’re afraid of losing the relationship if they don't have sex. This is one of the worst reasons to have sex. Anyone who would leave you because you don’t want to have sex does not love you (see Chapter 12 for more on this).

- For gifts. Many people have sex to get gifts, money or other favours, like getting good marks in school. This can be very complicated, for example if your sexual partner is paying your school fees. But these are the wrong reasons to have sex. They won't make you feel good about yourself. You shouldn't use your body to get something from someone else. No matter what it is—money, presents, special treatment—it's not worth it!

- To feel grown up. Many people rush to have sex because they think it will make them mature. But having sex really doesn’t change anything about you inside. It won't make you mature, and it doesn’t make you an adult.

- To fit in with or impress peers. Many young people feel as though everyone around them is having sex—as though they are the only ones who aren’t having sex. This can be worrying, and some adolescents have sex simply because they think their friends are all doing it. But the truth is that most people don't tell the truth about sex, and many people make up stories because they want to impress other people. Many of your peers who say they're having sex really are not having sex.

- To have a baby. Sexual intercourse is the only kind of sexual activity that will give you a baby. Most people want babies at some time in their lives, but few want to have a baby during adolescence (read Chapter 11).

Sexual intercourse is how most people in the world have got HIV. If you are not ready to protect yourself and your partner by always using a condom, you are not ready for sexual intercourse.

**SETTING SEXUAL LIMITS**

Some people think that sex is a powerful and uncontrollable force that just happens, like thunder or rain. But the truth is that sex—having sexual intercourse—is a deliberate decision. When you have sex, it is not nature overcoming you. It is you who make a decision. In fact you make many decisions about sex: When? With whom? Why? Where? How often? With a condom? Without?

Sex is a big decision. Try to make sure that it is your decision. Block out all those voices who say that “everybody” is having sex. “Everybody” is not having sex. And, anyway, you are you. You are not “everybody.”

If you are deciding whether or not to have sex, think about this: Are you ready to cope with the demands of safer sex—correct and consistent condom use, HIV counselling and testing, and more? Most adolescents aren’t ready to handle all these responsibilities, so be honest with yourself. If you don't feel ready, you can say “No” and wait until you are older.
You also need to care for your partner, and he or she must care for you. Caring takes time. Friendship and closeness don't develop overnight. If you aren't true friends, you may find the sex embarrassing. This is a sure sign that this is not the right person or the right time for you.

If you and your partner are not ready for sex, stick to kissing, holding hands and hugging. Set limits and agree on them. Never do anything that you or your partner finds unpleasant or distasteful.

| 1. Do my partner and I know each other well? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 2. Do we feel connected to each other and part of each other's lives? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 3. Are we both committed to the relationship? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 4. Do we trust each other? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 5. Do we communicate well? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 6. Can we talk with each other comfortably about sex? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 7. Are we thinking about having sex because we really want to—or because we feel pressure to have sex? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 8. Have we talked about what kind of contraceptive method to use? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 9. Have we discussed the need for HIV tests for both of us? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 10. Have we talked about how to protect ourselves from STIs including HIV/AIDS? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 11. Have we agreed to use condoms and other contraception every time we have sex? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 12. Will my partner respect my right to say “yes” or “no” to each sexual encounter? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 13. Will I respect my partner's right to say “yes” or “no” to each sexual encounter? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |
| 14. Will the setting for the sexual relationship be safe and comfortable? | yes | no | maybe | I don't know |

If you answered “no”, “maybe” or “I don’t know” to any of these questions, maybe you and your partner are not ready to have sex. It might be better to wait.
DECIDING NOT TO HAVE SEX

Andrew, 17, Tanzania
“My friends and I talk about sex. We also talk about the impact sex can have on us like if we make a girl pregnant, we would be in trouble, forced to marry or chased out of school.”

Halima, 14, Kenya
“The best reasons for delaying sex are to wait for a person of the right choice and to wait until you get married.”

Many young people choose not to have sex for some very good reasons:

- They are worried about pregnancy and STIs/HIV/AIDS, and they do not want to take risks.
- They are too young and do not feel ready.
- They don’t want to disappoint their parents.
- They feel it goes against their values or their religion.
- They would rather wait and concentrate on their studies.
- They want to be sure that their boyfriend or girlfriend truly loves them.

If you are faced with the decision whether or not to have sex, remember that sex can have serious consequences like HIV and unwanted pregnancy, which could change your life forever. You need to think through this decision very carefully, keeping this in mind:

- Waiting is the best way to stay safe and to stay healthy.
- You have the right to say “No” to sex and to stick with your decision.
- If you decide to say “Yes” to sex, you must practise safer sex to avoid pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other STIs. No condom, no sex.

TALKING WITH YOUR PARTNER ABOUT SEX

Decisions about sexual intercourse involve two people and require good communication skills. It’s very important to be able to tell your partner what you do and do not want to do.
Many people feel uncomfortable and embarrassed talking about sex, but it usually gets easier with time and practice. Here are some tips:

- **Think about why you do or do not want to do something.** Know what your reasons are so that you can explain them clearly to your partner.

- **Practise beforehand.** If you aren't sure how to talk about sex with your girlfriend or boyfriend, try talking with a close, trusted friend or a youth counsellor first. Ask them how they would bring up the subject and how they would talk about it. Get ideas about how to handle the situation.

- **Choose a good time and place.** Choose a good time to talk with your boyfriend or girlfriend—a time when neither one of you is distracted by other things and a time when you both are feeling relaxed and comfortable. It’s also important to choose a good place. Choose a place where you don’t have to worry about other people overhearing you. At the same time, choose a place that isn’t so private that you feel worried that your boyfriend or girlfriend will get the wrong idea.

- **Don’t wait until you are already “in the heat of the moment” to begin discussing sex.** It is pretty difficult to have a good conversation about sex when one or both of you is feeling excited and in the mood. Make sure you talk about what kind of sexual relationship you want, long before you and your partner find yourselves in a sexy situation.

- **Be honest about your feelings and the way you feel.** Don’t use other people or other factors as excuses. For example, if you don’t want to have sex because you want to wait until marriage, don’t tell your boyfriend that you don’t want to have sex because you’re afraid of getting pregnant or because you’re afraid that your mother will find out. If you tell these excuses to your boyfriend, he might think that you are trying to tell him that you want him to use a condom or that you want to go to his place. To avoid misunderstandings, be honest and direct about your feelings.

- **Stand your ground and don’t give in to pressure.** Even people you care about a lot can pressure you to do things you don’t want to do. It can be very hard to withstand this kind of pressure because you like the person and you want him or her to be happy. Remember, however, that someone who loves you should not want to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. If your boyfriend or girlfriend keeps pressuring you, it is either because they don’t understand how you feel or because they don’t care about your feelings as much as they should. Stand your ground, and make sure they understand what you want.
• **Pay attention to your feelings and instincts.** If at heart you don't feel that something is right for you, don't do it. Wait until you don't have any fears, worries or concerns.

• **Always allow yourself to change your mind.** Supposing you told your boyfriend that you would have sex with him, but now you are feeling as though you do not want to go through with it. This is okay. You have a right to change your mind. You have good reasons for feeling the way you do.

Even if you have had sex before, you can always decide to stop. There is no problem with stopping. You do not have to justify why you are stopping. Just remember, people have a right to change their minds.
Adolescence is a time when you become more aware of yourself as a person who has sexual feelings. You become more aware of your sexuality—how you feel, think and behave as a male or a female and what you want in terms of relationships with other people.

**Being a sexually healthy person means that you can express your sexuality in ways that are not harmful to yourself or to anyone else.** It means that you do not take risks like having unprotected sex, which could result in unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS.

Everyone has sexual feelings, and **you don't need to have sex when you have sexual feelings.** Sexual intercourse is only one way that people express their sexual feelings. But there are many other ways to express sexual feelings, such as talking to each other, holding hands, hugging and kissing.

A virgin is someone—a girl or a boy—who has never had sexual intercourse. **Virginity can only be lost through sexual intercourse.** Girls cannot lose their virginity through sports, using a tampon or any other activity.

**Keeping your virginity and waiting to have sex will keep you safe.** It will never hurt you to wait. Many adolescents decide not to have sex because they feel that they are too young, and they do not feel ready. You have a right to say “No” to sex.

Sexual intercourse is how most people in the world have become infected with HIV. **If you aren't ready to protect yourself and your partner by always using a condom, you are not ready for sexual intercourse.**

Talking about sex with your girlfriend or boyfriend can seem difficult and embarrassing at first, but it’s important to be able to tell your friend what you do and do not want to do so that there won’t be any misunderstandings. Choose a good time to talk—don’t wait until you are “in the heat of the moment.” Be honest about your feelings, and don’t allow yourself to be pressured into something you do not want to do.

Remember, even if you have had sex before, you can always decide to stop having sex. There is no problem with stopping. If you can’t protect yourself against pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other STIs, you should stop having sex.