


[ACPA Home](#)
[Home](#)
[Newsletter](#)
[Membership](#)
[Directorate](#)
[Convention](#)
[Activities](#)
[Resources](#)
[About ACPA](#)
[Standing Committees](#)
[Commissions](#)
[State/Int'l Divisions](#)
[Membership](#)
[Professional Development](#)
[Annual Conventions](#)
[Publications](#)
[Career Advancement](#)
[Research](#)
[ACPA Foundation](#)
[Ethics](#)
[Partnerships](#)

A Romantic Relationships Group For College Students

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At UT Austin, the Counseling & Mental Health Center offers approximately 30 groups per semester. Clinicians like myself thus get the privilege of designing groups that they believe meet the needs of college students. Given statistics about interpersonal violence and the importance of romantic relationships to students, a group seemed to be an appropriate place to offer more skills and knowledge, as well as peer input, about romantic relationships.

In 2008, I started a group titled Romantic Relationships: A Healthy Approach, which has since been offered every semester. It is a six-week psychoeducational group that is open to any UT student. The group is not intended for couples because of the impact this could have on group dynamics.

Each week, the group looks at a different area of romantic relationships, but certain themes continue throughout all six sessions. The prevailing themes include understanding one's boundaries, mutuality, self-awareness, and seeking clarification rather than making assumptions. There is also an emphasis on self-soothing, particularly during conflict management.

The first session focuses on examining the dynamics of abusive relationships. Group members receive psychoeducation about the continuums of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. In addition, the group members learn about the "red flags" of an abusive relationship and watch a role-play in which they identify the red flags that they see.

The next session focuses on issues pertaining to early dating. Many students express curiosity about how to meet others and how to express their interest in starting the relationship. This session is tailored to the students' needs and allows space for exploring and brainstorming about ways to meet people, how to ask people out, and the purposes of early dating. There is also discussion about hook-up culture versus more formal dating, and the group members evaluate their own priorities and examine how being in a relationship can impact different areas of their lives.

The third and fourth sessions cover communication and conflict management, respectively. In these sessions, the group discusses communication styles, listening, and ways to ask for what is needed. They receive information about what exacerbates conflict and how one's own reactions impact conflict. The group also learns about the importance of self-soothing during times of conflict. The group members participate in role-plays about communication styles and watch video clips from current TV shows or movies to identify pitfalls in the characters' communication.

What is this?

During the fifth session, the group members focus on sex and sexuality. The group learns about common STIs, sexual violence, and resources on campus for students to access contraception or speak to the sexual health educator. The group focuses on identifying their needs and wants in their sex lives and communicating these to a partner.

In the last session, the group members look at the issue of breaking up, paralleled as the group itself draws to a close. The facilitators discuss breakups as a process of grief and loss. The group brainstorms characteristics that have been helpful and not helpful in their own or friends' breakups.

Leading this group over the last three semesters alongside my two facilitators, Marianne Stout and LeLaina Romero, has been a pleasure. This group has not only given us the opportunity to teach and facilitate sessions about relationship dynamics, but has provided space to explore differences in culture, sexual orientation, and ideas about gender roles. Most importantly, the students have responded with enthusiasm about having a place to discuss these issues, and I believe that it is to the benefit of any college or university to provide such a forum for learning about relationships.

[Next Article](#)