

RECOGNISING RED FLAGS IN CONNECTIONS

*Self-compassion and positive self-talk are
key skills against unhealthy dynamics*

Identifying signs of red flags in a relationship can make a difference for teens exploring the complex world of platonic or romantic connections, *writes Savaira Ratukula.*

Griffith University School of Applied Psychology Dr Melanie Zimmer-Gembeck's work concentrates on the importance of social relationships for developing good coping and emotion-regulation skills.

"To date, evidence suggests the most helpful skill to cultivate is self-compassion coupled with positive self-talk," she said.

"One approach is to listen to music or podcasts that remind you of how others use positive self-talk/self-compassion strategies in their daily life.

"By working on being kind and positive with yourself, you remind yourself you are valuable and deserve a good relationship with others."

Having a good relationship with

oneself includes the ability to identify warning signs for potential red flags in a relationship.

The two major red flags are coercive behaviour where one feels like they have no choices or are controlled, and chaotic behaviour where one is unsure if a friend or partner will be there for them.

Small actions, such as extreme jealousy, requiring lots of time together or excessively monitoring movements to the point where privacy and personal boundaries are ignored can be confused with care, romance and connection, especially early on in a relationship, Dr Zimmer-Gembeck said.

This can later become control, smothering, social isolation, and coercion.

A recent national survey of Australian secondary students found among the 61 per cent who were involved in a romantic relationship, 37 per cent had felt frightened of someone they were



in a relationship with at some point and 31 per cent had experienced technology-facilitated harassment or tracking by a partner.

"Coercive controlling relationships don't allow space for disagreements about values, ideas, opinions, activities or behaviour without negative consequences such as hostility, threats, or punishments like withdrawal of love or attention," Dr Zimmer-Gembeck said.

While conflict is often seen as a negative, it does occur in all healthy relationships.

Dr Zimmer-Gembeck noted that working through conflict in healthy relationships can help clarify differences

and strengthen personal views, both of which contribute to personal growth.

Within friendship dynamics, aggressive behaviours including exclusion, ostracism, mean teasing, or spreading rumours can chip away at one's self-worth.

Data from the Kids Helpline revealed more than 1000 young Australians had reported coercive control and toxic behaviours by peers, including friends, between January 2024 and July 2025.

"They (aggressive behaviours) harm self-esteem, harm existing relationships or keep people out of relationships or groups," Dr Zimmer-Gembeck said.

"All of these behaviours tend to go together and can lead to declining self-esteem, support from friends, mood, and increasing sadness, worries, and loneliness."

Dr Zimmer-Gembeck advised it's important for parents and carers to listen when a teen comes forward with concerns about their relationship. Asking lots of questions or immediately giving advice can prove counter-productive to the situation, she advised.

If you suspect a teen relationship is coercive and chaotic, especially if there's an increase in a teen's self-doubt, significant changes in interests, or relationships within the family change or suffer, Dr Zimmer-Gembeck said it's best to contact Headspace, Kids Helpline, or a GP.

A photograph of a young woman with brown hair, smiling and wearing a dark brown school blazer with a crest on the left chest. She is in a school setting with other students and tables in the background.

Be Seen, Be Heard, Be Known

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