

# For families, partners & carers: helpful tips for challenging relationships

**Caring or supporting a person with a personality disorder can be challenging. Just as each person is unique, so is every relationship; and what helps to improve relationships is different for everyone. Below are some tips for maintaining healthy relationships with the person you care about.**

Remember to look after yourself. The best way to support and care for a loved one is to make sure you are healthy and feeling good yourself. This includes looking after your social, physical, mental and emotional health needs.

- Take time out to reflect – be prepared to allow some time away to think things through and allow some time to heal when a situation has become too hot to handle.
- Ensure that there are clear boundaries and expectations for the relationship – everyone needs to know what is expected of them and your safety is important. Find a way to collaborate and agree upon what are acceptable and unacceptable behaviours (e.g. anger is OK, violence is not).
- Convey encouragement and hope about the person's capacity to change and recover, and support the person through set-backs.
- Demonstrate empathy – show understanding by reflecting back how you experience the person (e.g. "I can see you're feeling hurt about your Dad leaving").
- Listen to the person's current experience – make time to hear what the person is saying. If it is not the right time, suggest another time (e.g. talking on the telephone whilst shopping may not be the best time to listen to the person).
- Validate the person's current feelings – let the person know that how they are feeling is important.
- Take the person's experience seriously, including verbal and non-verbal communications (e.g. pay attention to what the person is saying as well as how they are acting or behaving).
- Maintain a non-judgmental approach – remember that the person is different from you and has their own way of doing things (it may not be the most efficient or effective way but it is their way!).
- Stay calm – in the height of a crisis or argument, it is normal to react angrily or become defensive. However, this often isn't helpful. It can take practise, but staying calm when things get heated can help reduce a crisis.
- Remain respectful – when emotions run high it can be easy to be dismissive or judgmental. Finding a way to value the other person's life choices and opinions, which may be different from your own, can help improve the relationship.
- Remain caring – focus on the person as a whole, including the things you like about them, rather than just focusing on the person's challenging or difficult behaviours.
- Engage in open communication – this includes listening and talking. Don't be afraid to let the person know how you're feeling and how things are affecting you.
- Use humour where appropriate – this can help to lighten a situation.
- Be clear, consistent and reliable – this can reduce the other person's problems if they get clear messages and expectations from you.
- Remember that some behaviours may have been helpful in the past even though they're no longer appropriate – demonstrate empathy and talk with the person about what is acceptable.

*The Project Air Strategy acknowledges the major support of NSW Health. The Project works with mental health clinicians, consumers and carers to deliver effective treatments, implements research strategies supporting scientific discoveries, and offers high quality training and education. Contact us at [info-projectair@uow.edu.au](mailto:info-projectair@uow.edu.au) or visit [www.projectairstrategy.org](http://www.projectairstrategy.org)*