



London Family  
Court Clinic

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Professional Services for Families in Court



Rethinking Resiliency:  
How understanding our world  
can help us bounce back



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This new resource addresses the social forces that impact youth. Aimed at helping professionals, youth and parents, this resource 'rethinks resiliency' by exploring social norms that promote violence and marginalization.

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Resilience is about coping, adapting, and recovering from hardships in life. It can also be described as ‘bouncing back’ from life difficulties or challenges, which can include things like significant stressors, trauma, tragedy, and other adverse life experiences. Many youth today face challenges which require resilience and coping skills (e.g., the high cost of education, unemployment, poor family support, leaving home early, or abuse from a partner or family member).

The aim of this resource is to help youth (and those in the helping professions who work with youth) ‘rethink resiliency,’ with the ultimate goal of building resiliency in youth so that they can better handle life’s challenges in a healthy way. This resource addresses the social forces that impact youth (e.g., sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism), which are often internalized and can impact a youth’s identity, relationships and self-worth. And it looks at building critical thinking skills as one pathway to building resiliency. In other words, this resource offers an opportunity for reflective thinking, as well as practical information to support healthy relationships and, ultimately, to help build resilience in youth.

### Who can use this resource?

This resource is aimed at helping professionals (e.g., counsellors, social workers, teachers) who work with youth, as well as youth themselves and their parents. It is a ‘thinking’ document, meaning that it is intended to support a reflective process while encouraging the reader to take a step back and rethink resiliency, taking into account social norms and their impact on individuals. The resource also helps support youth in

building practical skills that promote resiliency, such as critical thinking, building healthy relationships, and safer coping.

### Philosophy

As a society, we all too often view our individual experiences or problems from the perspective of individual choices, strengths and weaknesses, without giving thought to how our problems or challenges are connected to wider social forces, like the economy, dominant attitudes, values and beliefs, or institutional rules and policies. When we view our problems as solely coming from our own choices, we often internalize feelings of shame and blame. Youth are uniquely impacted by this dilemma, and that often makes it more difficult for young people to access support and services. This is problematic, because building a healthy sense of identity and creating healthy relationships with others is not only central to a young person’s wellbeing, but it helps to build a youth’s resiliency in the face of life’s difficulties and challenges.



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# Introduction

We all experience hardships and difficulties in life. But some people are able to deal with and overcome challenges much easier than others. Why do some people seem to possess great resilience, while others seem to have very little? These are complicated questions, but they're important ones. And they'll be explored throughout this resource.

Resilience is about coping, adapting, and recovering from hardships in life. It can also be described as 'bouncing back' from life difficulties or challenges, and it is defined by how we support each other and how we use our strengths to move through experiences of adversity.

Being mindful of building and protecting resilience is an important process, and it contributes to personal growth. We mature and grow when we learn from our challenges. People who are resilient have learned skills for effectively coping with stressful or challenging life situations. Through that learning, they have built resiliency over time and are better able to effectively manage future challenges. In other words, dealing with challenges can make us grow! And in doing so, we build strength and resiliency in the process. When we 'bounce back,' we're better prepared for future challenges because of the growth and learning that we've accumulated.

One way to build resiliency is to deepen our understanding and changing and/or challenging our thinking about the world in which we live. When we don't see ourselves in context (within a larger social, political and economic picture), we can be left with feelings of shame and blame. In other words, we can feel responsible for our struggles when, in fact, our personal choices are only part of the picture. Many of us take a highly personal, individualized view of our problems, feelings, experiences and situations. But by changing our perspective of the way that we view our experiences, we can build resiliency. In fact, taking a step back and viewing ourselves within 'the big picture' is an important skill that can lead to resiliency.



# Social systems, institutions, and social norms

**Social systems** are the ‘big picture’ in which individuals, cultures, and institutions operate. These social systems consist of systems of oppression, social institutions and domains, social norms, and individual beliefs. Social systems influence everything from individual relationships to laws. Examples of social systems include capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism (see page 6 for definitions of these particular social systems).

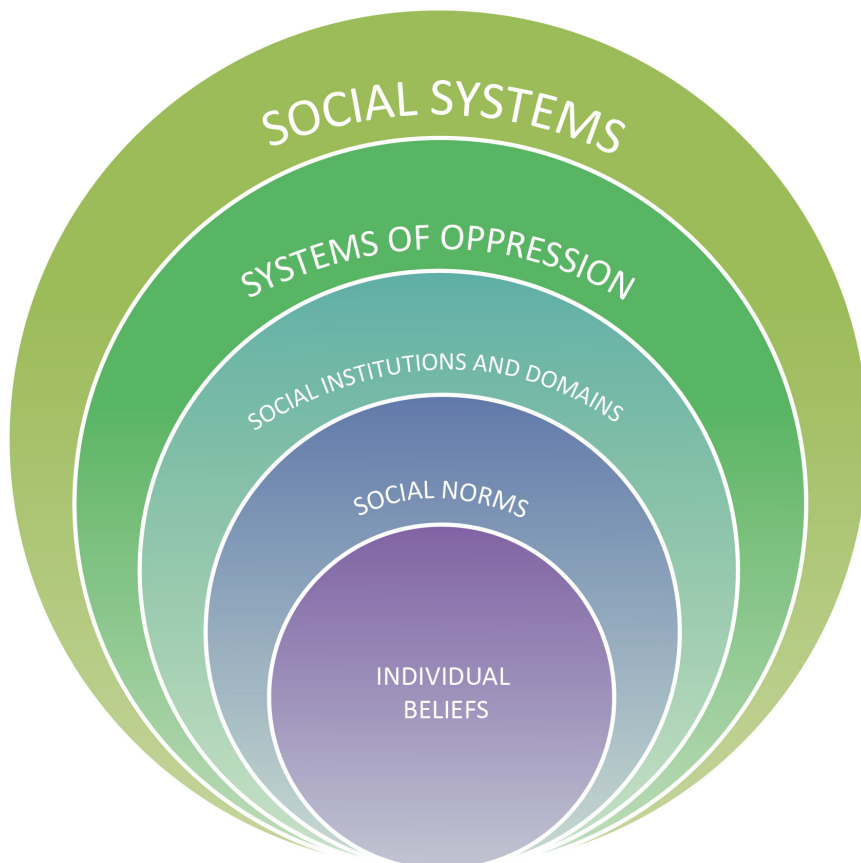
**Systems of oppression** are the ways in which social systems maintain the ‘status quo,’ or what is considered to be ‘normal’ in a society. Under capitalism, for example, the status quo is the belief that everyone can become wealthy if they work hard. In other words, people get what they deserve. If an individual is considered to be ‘poor’ under capitalism, the status quo says that it must mean that they didn’t work hard enough, perhaps because they are ‘lazy’ or ‘undeserving.’ The system of oppression that maintains

capitalism is classism – the belief that some social classes (e.g., the upper or wealthy class) are better than others (e.g., the lower or poor class).

**Social institutions** and domains regulate human behaviour and interactions as a way to maintain social order. Examples of social institutions and domains include education, the economy, the healthcare system, and the justice system. The purpose of social institutions and domains is to maintain the status quo of social systems (similar to systems of oppression), and they do so through policies and regulations.

**Social norms** are the dominant beliefs that an individual, a culture, or an institution or domain have about particular groups of people and about society as a whole.

**Individual beliefs** are social norms that have become internalized (or have become adopted) by individual people.



*From largest to smallest: Social systems are the overall ideology (or dominant beliefs), and the individual is surrounded by them, as well as the social system’s subsystems. Each level reinforces the other.*



## TABLE: SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND EXAMPLES

Social system	System of oppression	Social institution and domain	Social norm	Individual belief
Patriarchy	Sexism	Education	Men are better suited for careers in engineering.	"Men are smarter than women."
Capitalism	Classism	Economy	People who are poor are lazy.	"People who are homeless don't deserve compassion."
Colonialism	Racism	Criminal justice	Black people are more violent than white people.	"Black people should be feared."

### Examples of social systems

**Patriarchy** is a Greek word that translates to 'rule of the father.' Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold power over females. Male predominance can be found in most, if not all, social institutions and domains, including education, economics, and politics.

**Capitalism** is a social (and economic) system based on profit in which goods and services are privately owned rather than owned by the state (government). Capitalism acknowledges that inequality exists among people, but believes that inherent inequality to be a positive reinforcement because it encourages people to 'work hard' and invent the 'next big thing.'

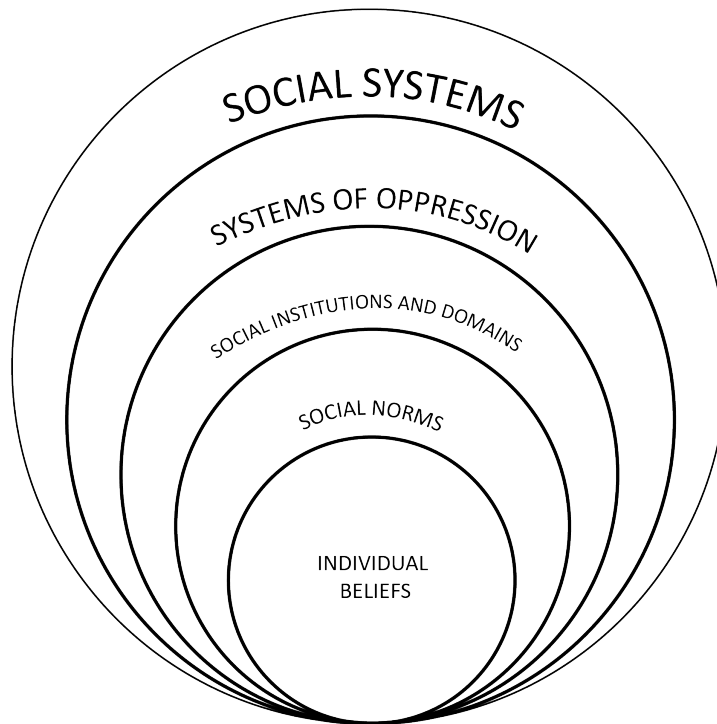
**Colonialism** is a social system in which one group dominates, controls, and governs another group or nation. Colonization, the act of colonialism, is often accomplished through forceful means.



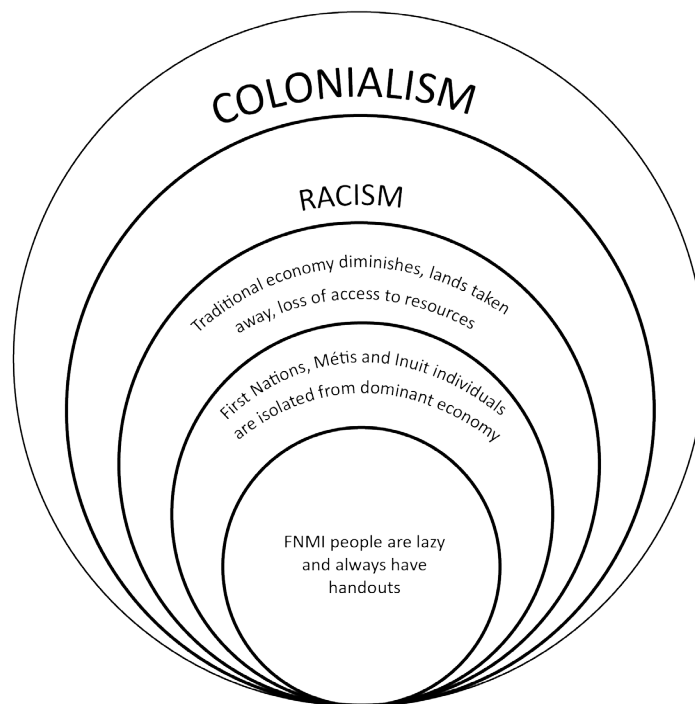


# WORKSHEET: SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND SUBSYSTEMS

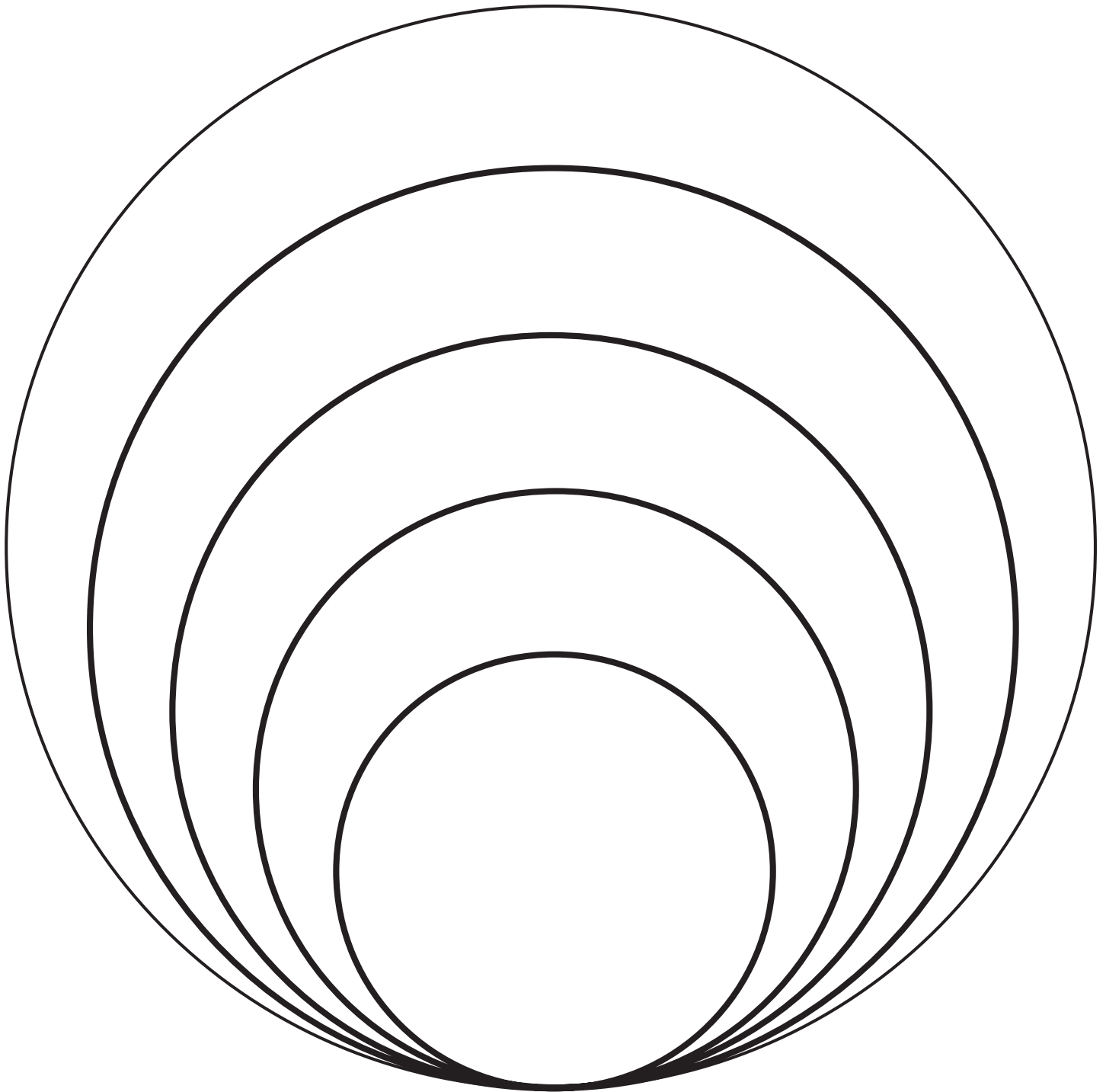
Using the blank circles add in brackets (on the next page) representing a social system and its subsystems, choose a social system and come up with a system of oppression, social institution or domain, a social norm, and an individual belief that supports and reinforces that social system. Use the model and example below to guide your choices, and create your own example on the next page.



Example:



.....  
EXAMPLE: SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND SUBSYSTEMS (CONT'D)



# How the big picture impacts the individual:

## Examples:

- A young man is feeling depressed and is struggling academically. If we focus on his individual struggles, we might not see that his school lacks funding for mental health care, or that his mother is struggling financially because she lost her job (as a result of a plant closure during a recession). Both of these larger systemic factors impact the young man's experience of depression. However, we often link our experiences to individual choices only, without seeing the bigger picture. But simply understanding the larger picture can help us reframe our experiences and reduce the feelings of responsibility that can lead to a negative self-perception. Reframing could mean changing a thought such as 'I should feel better and should be able to work through these sad feelings on my own,' to a more helpful thought like, 'I'm coping well, given the financial challenges that my family is facing and the limited mental health resources that I have.'
- A young woman is struggling with anxiety at her new school. We focus on her personal story. But we don't take into account that she is a young woman of First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI) descent who does not have access to secondary school education in her home community – due to a lack of government funding which began under colonialism. In order for her to access education, she must leave her family and her community at the age of 14. Without seeing the larger context, we might blame her for her anxiety and any struggles that she has with attaining her educational goals.



# Understanding the big picture – Examples:

<p>Systems of oppression</p> <p>- Have historical roots, and are the origin of today's institutions and social norms</p>	<p>Social institutions and domains</p> <p>- Education, economy, healthcare, and institutions that marginalize (exclude) some and prioritize or create privilege for others</p>	<p>Social norms</p> <p>- Beliefs that are dominant, normalized, and widespread</p>	<p>Individual beliefs (Internal thoughts)</p> <p>- Beliefs that are internalized, which can lead to feelings of shame and self-blame</p>
<p><b>Patriarchy</b></p>	<p><b>Education System –</b> Colleges and universities lack training, supports, and policies to address gender-based violence on campus.</p>	<p><b>Sexism –</b> Women are responsible for relationships and need to put aside their own needs to support others. A 'boys will be boys' attitude is supported and maintained by minimizing the disrespect shown towards women within the campus culture. 'Locker room talk' is the norm.</p>	<p>A young woman on campus becomes involved in an emotionally abusive relationship. She becomes more and more anxious, and her grades begin to decline. She believes that if she were a better partner, or more attentive, her partner would resolve his issues and they would have a better relationship. She feels responsible for the abuse.</p>
<p><b>Colonialism</b></p>	<p><b>Education System –</b> First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) children sent to residential schools to learn the language and the culture of the dominant society. Children are not raised within the context of their own family, culture and language. As a result, children struggle with trauma, attachment (a connection to their parents which forms the foundation of their internal wellbeing), and a loss of culture, language, and spirituality.</p>	<p><b>Racism –</b> FNMI language, culture, and spirituality (and, ultimately, its people) are devalued. Today, FNMI peoples are blamed for their own experiences of distress and family breakdown. But FNMI families have limited access to resources (economically, socially, and politically) to create change.</p>	<p>A young FNMI male youth feels isolated and disconnected from his family and culture. With limited supports, he turns to alcohol to cope with his feelings of distress. The limited resources available to him contribute to his feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.</p> <p><b>Internalized racism –</b> The young male begins to blame himself for his own isolation.</p>



<p><b>Colonialism</b></p>	<p><b>Healthcare System –</b> The FNMI community has a traumatic and complex history with dominant institutions, predominantly via residential schools. Understandably, experiences with residential schools has created distrust of dominant institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals etc.).</p>	<p><b>Racism –</b> The dominant culture believes that the impacts of the residential school system and the reserve system are over ('racism is a thing of the past'). But the dominant culture has a limited understanding of the complex process of healing – both for individuals and for communities. They have an individualistic view of health outcomes, and their understanding of the social determinants of health is also limited.</p>	<p>An FNMI woman is fearful of dominant institutions, because of her own mother's experiences of abuse in a residential school. As a result, she delays reaching out for healthcare services, as she often feels minimized when reporting her concerns. She is told that she needs to make better choices. This delays a diagnosis and much-needed medical care, which extends her recovery time and delays her return to school and her ability to care for her family. She feels responsible for letting her family down.</p>
<p><b>Patriarchy/Religion/LGBTQ2+</b></p>	<p><b>Religious system –</b> The religious beliefs present in school systems support heterosexism (heterosexuality is presented as the only 'normal' and natural state).</p>	<p><b>Social norms –</b> Gender roles are rigid and devalue those who feel or behave outside of gender and sexual identity norms. LGBTQ2+ youth experience high levels of family rejection, which leads to an increased risk for suicide and depression.</p>	<p>An LGBTQ2+ youth doesn't feel safe at school and is rejected by his father. He begins to feel depressed and feels that he is the source of his own distress. He begins to wish that he was 'normal.' In order to cope, he further isolates himself from family and friends who are non-accepting of his sexuality. As a result, his depression worsens.</p>
<p><b>Capitalism</b></p>	<p><b>Economic System –</b> The current economy offers few job opportunities, which makes it difficult to support a family. Minimum wage jobs do not pay enough to cover rent and groceries.</p>	<p><b>Classism –</b> Those who 'work hard' have money. This internalizes blame and shame for those who are poor.</p>	<p>A young man blames himself as a result of classism, as well as sexism (e.g., gender norms also tell him that he must be the breadwinner for his young family). He feels responsible for his low wages – even though he is working full-time hours, he works hard, and he's always on time.</p>



<p><b>Capitalism</b></p>	<p>A minimum wage job doesn't pay enough to cover rent, food, and transportation. Families continuously choose between which bills they can afford to pay.</p>	<p><b>Classism</b> – Individuals are believed to be non-compliant and uncooperative by social workers, therapists, and doctors. The link between poverty and one's health is invisible to healthcare providers.</p>	<p>A mother misses giving medication to her child and misses appointments due to lack of money and transportation. She feels responsible for her child's missed appointments, and she starts to view herself as a failure.</p>
<p><b>Capitalism</b></p>	<p><b>Healthcare System</b> – Doesn't address the impacts of poverty on the health of patients.</p>	<p><b>Classism</b> – Doctor assumes that illness is caused only by disease, and doesn't take into account the larger context of poverty for women and children.</p>	<p>Doctor diagnoses a child with abdominal pain, when the real problem is hunger, as the family doesn't have access to better employment, and therefore doesn't have enough food to eat. The family feels helpless to respond to their child's needs.</p>





## Critical consciousness: Seeing yourself and others in context

Critical consciousness is the ability to identify forms of oppression. It means having the ability to perceive social, political, and economic oppression in the world around us, and then use that understanding to inform and illuminate our personal experiences. It is a process by which people can ‘name’ their experiences. For instance, women and girls often experience violence in their day-to-day lives. This experience is normalized, meaning that it becomes so widely accepted that we don’t identify the ideas and concepts as being harmful. A good example is sexist jokes. They are frequently perceived as harmless, but they are actually a function of our social norms that devalue women, and they promote disrespect towards women and girls. Not all disrespect leads to violence, of course, but all violence starts with disrespect.<sup>1</sup> Experiences of sexism, meanwhile, are further complicated if women also experience other forms of oppression, like classism, racism, heterosexism, or ableism.

By naming our experiences, we can work towards changing how we view ourselves and others. Critical consciousness depersonalizes experiences and allows us to see that we are impacted by forces other than (or in addition to) our own personal choices. By changing our thinking, we can reduce distress.

This may or may not lead to action. For example, a young woman may *think* differently about the sexual harassment that she experienced on campus (e.g., by seeing that the university lacks policies to support women), but she may not choose to *act* differently (e.g., by reporting her sexual harassment on campus to the authorities). But even without action, changing our thinking can reduce distress. And distress is often linked to self-blame and feelings of responsibility. Raising critical consciousness, then, is the first step to overcoming feelings of self-blame and shame.

Critical consciousness allows for individuals to link personal challenges to larger social systems and institutions (e.g., a young woman’s distress is linked to the lack of support on campus). Building this link creates resiliency, and this process allows a person to reframe their experiences in a new way. Our dominant social norms frequently tell us that individuals – and individuals only – are responsible for their own feelings of distress. Critical consciousness allows us to see that there are larger societal issues at play. It offers a new understanding of ourselves and others. We all make choices within the context of social norms, systems and institutions, and seeing and understanding oppression through these social norms,



systems and institutions is no easy task. It requires support and reflection. A worthwhile activity would be to go through the reflective worksheet, 'Putting it all together,' on page 31.

### Social norms and messages:

We have the opportunity to think critically about the messages and images that we receive from society. There are plenty of valuable messages and lots of opportunities to learn from the wider world. However, not all messages suit us. We can reflect on and make decisions about our own unique values, and we can decide what we want to take with us moving forward.

For example, our dominant, white (European/North American), patriarchal culture often holds up expectations or a 'script' for a 'happy life.' We receive literally hundreds of messages every day about who and what is 'ideal' in our society. Questioning these assumptions is part of developing critical thinking skills. The process of questioning these messages makes us conscious of these assumptions and beliefs, and being aware allows us to have more choice. This process is part of building up resiliency.

In order to have a clearer understanding of social norms and their impact on us, it can be helpful to think of some examples. Here are some common examples of social norms and messages (and the ways in which they're oppressive):

- "Boys will be boys." (sexist)
- "You play like a girl." (sexist)
- "Just get over it." (minimizes distressing feelings, which are a normal response to abnormal experiences)
- "Women are responsible for the happiness, care, and wellbeing of others." (sexist)
- "That's gay." (heterosexist)
- "You owe me, I bought you dinner." (sexist)
- "He wouldn't be poor if he wasn't so lazy." (classist)
- "Native people get free education." (racist)
- "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps." (classist)
- "That's ghetto." (classist/racist)
- "Women are responsible for relationships." (sexist and can lead to the assumption that women are responsible for 'fixing' abusive relationships)
- "Don't be a pussy." (sexist)

- "That's retarded." (ableist)
- "What was she wearing?" (sexist)
- "Buck up." (sexist)
- "Man up." (sexist)
- "You're a bucket." (classist)
- "Asians are good at math." (racist)
- "It's just a joke," or "Get over it." (minimizes disrespectful and abusive experiences)

Dominant North American thinking reinforces a belief that it is the individual alone who is responsible for being happy or distressed, for being wealthy or poor, or for being safe or unsafe. However, it is important to acknowledge the impact that social norms and systems have on individuals. Sometimes the belief in total individual responsibility takes the view that people and groups are equal. But in reality, that is simply not the case. Not all groups have equal access to resources and power. Unfortunately, if we don't acknowledge our unequal resources, we often think (wrongly) that our struggles are ours alone.



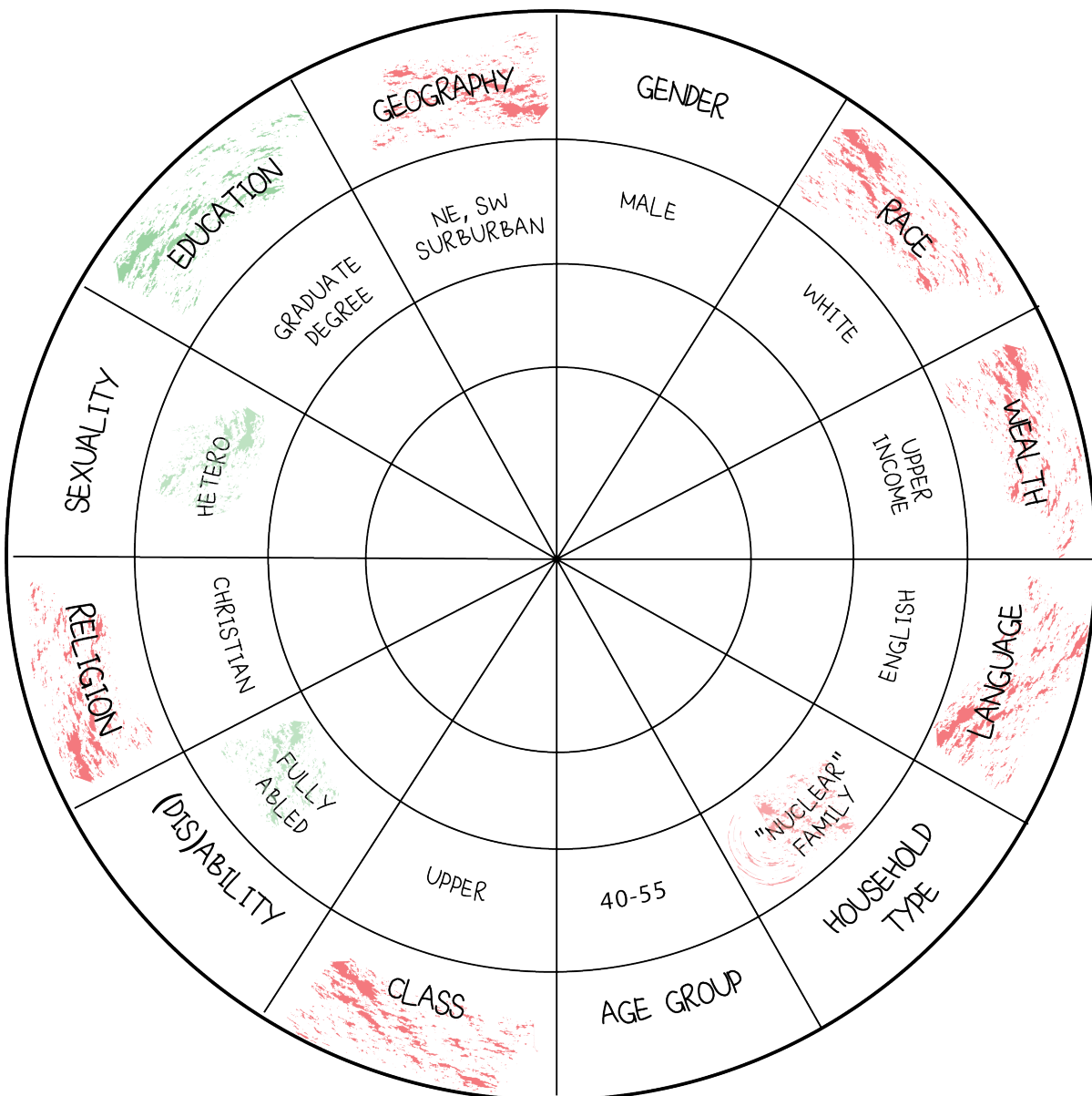


## HANDOUT: CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS – SEEING MYSELF IN CONTEXT

The outer layer represents the social institution, and the inner circle identifies the dominant or privileged group within that social institution. Pie slices should be shaded with green to identify the areas where one experiences privilege, and shaded with red in the areas where a person experiences marginalization.

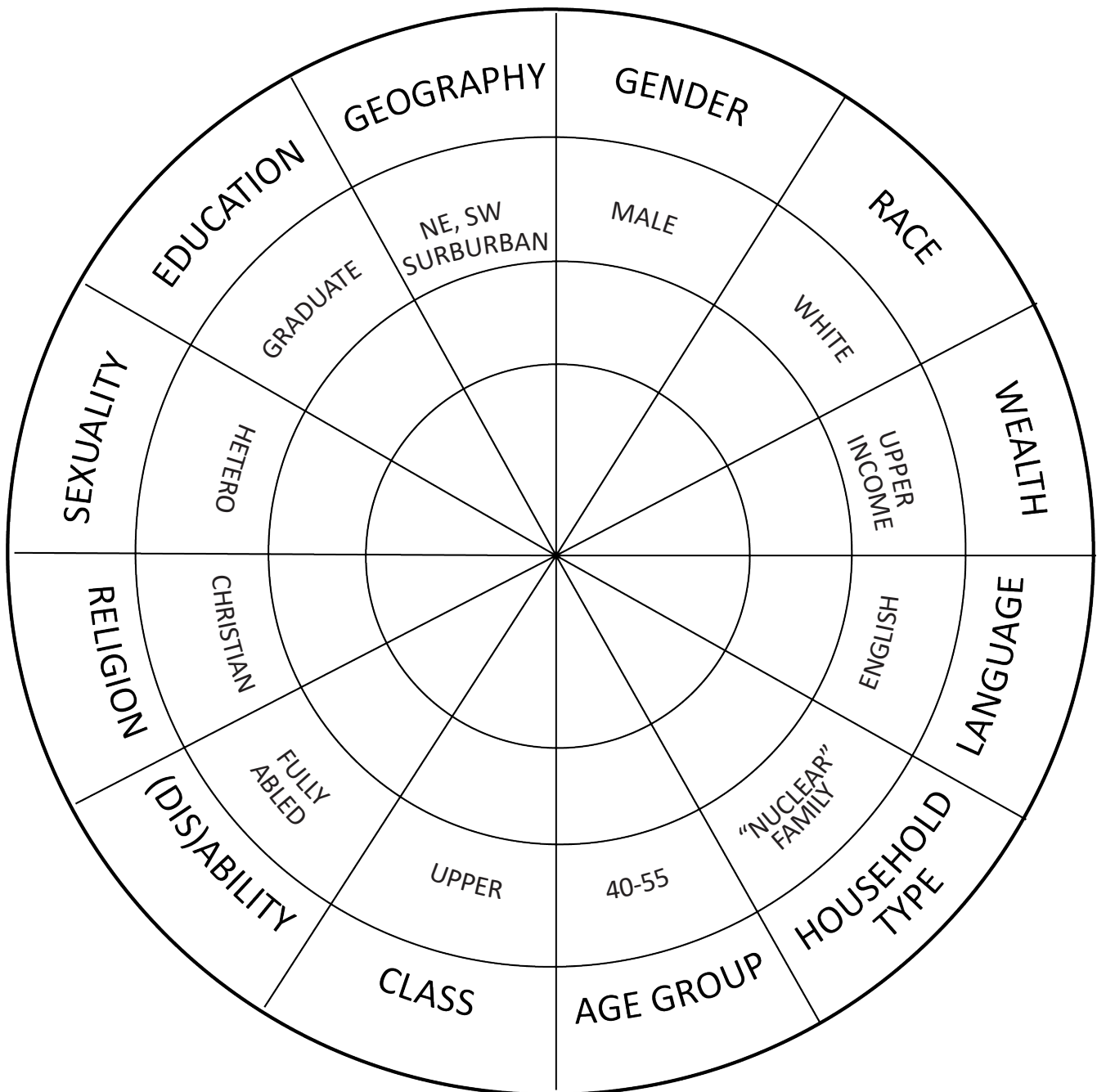
### Example:

Shereen is a young (23 years old) female newcomer with a master's degree in engineering (which she obtained before moving to Canada). Although her family had access to financial resources before the war in her home country, she has been struggling financially since coming to Canada. She is making minimum wage, and she is currently working outside of her profession (as a receptionist). She comes from a larger, multi-generational family. She does not identify as part of the dominant religion (Christian) in her small community in Stratford, Ontario. Despite being fluent in English, she is finding it difficult to build new friendships in her new community.



## HANDOUT: CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS – SEEING MYSELF IN CONTEXT

Shade in the pie with green to identify the areas where you experience privilege. Shade in the areas in red where you experience marginalization. The outer layer represents the social institution, and the inner circle identifies the dominant or privileged group within that social institution. This exercise will provide you with a visual of how you may feel supported or marginalized by the systems of oppression and social norms. Remember, seeing yourself in context helps build resiliency.



# Healthy relationships (with ourselves and others)

## Relationships with ourselves:

As we go about our lives, we receive many messages about ourselves – sometimes from the dominant culture, sometimes from larger systems, and sometimes from family and friends. It's important to try to be mindful of how these messages affect our internal dialogue (the things that we say to ourselves throughout the day). Do you criticize yourself? Or do you say encouraging and supportive things to yourself? Take notice of how many positive messages and how many negative messages you receive on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, our world frequently tells us that we are not okay, or that we are not good enough. But despite receiving these negative messages, we can change our outlook by being conscious of them and challenging and/or reframing them. This allows us to *think* in more helpful and supportive ways. And what we think has a profound impact on how we *feel*. Building links between what we think and how we feel helps build resiliency.

Sometimes, what we think comes from social norms and beliefs which are unhelpful and/or inaccurate (e.g., heterosexism, sexism, or racism). Take, for example, a belief that women are responsible for relationships, or that women are responsible for the wellbeing and happiness of others. These beliefs can be quite harmful. Why? Because, if believed, women and girls can then be held responsible for the angry and abusive behaviour of their partners (or other men in their lives).

It can be argued that the most important relationship you'll ever have is the one with yourself. Are you able to be kind, encouraging, and supportive of your own efforts, struggles and challenges? And if not, what supports do you need to get there?

## Relationships with others:

Good relationships involve respect. Without respect, people can feel worthless, demeaned, or unhappy. It can be easy to be confused about what a respectful relationship (and a respectful partner) looks like, given the messages that we receive from certain social

norms. But a respectful relationship involves seeing your partner as an equal person – not just as being 'strong' or 'attractive.' Further, respectful relationships involve:

- Respecting your partner's opinion. It's normal to have different opinions, ideas and priorities.
- Respecting emotions (there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to feel).
- Respecting privacy. Just because you're a couple doesn't mean you can access private emails and text messages. Behaviours like disclosing private information online is disrespectful.
- Respecting your partner's time and space. Couples need time together, but they also need time apart. Healthy relationships have a balance, and neither partner should feel isolated from their family and friends. <sup>2</sup>

## Violence in interpersonal relationships:

Defined as the psychological, physical or sexual violence against another person within the context of an intimate relationship, interpersonal violence can occur in same-sex relationships as well as opposite-sex relationships. It can occur online or in person, and it can be an isolated act of violence or a pattern of abuse. Interpersonal violence can also be defined as an attempt to gain power and control over another person. When we think about the term violence, we often associate it only with acts of physical force. But coercion is also a form of violence. Coercion is used to pressure, intimidate, threaten or shame another person into engaging in a particular behaviour. When someone feels pressured or threatened, no physical force is needed.

(Note: For more information on coercion and abuse, see the resource 'Helping an Abused Woman: An Essentials Guide,' which is also part of the DELTA series).

Coercive behaviour can include insults, name-calling, threats, isolating, shaming, withholding important information, disclosing private information without consent, damaging property, stalking, or spreading



rumours. All of these actions can also occur online through social media, texting, email or other electronic platforms. For more information about online and digital abuse, see the London Family Court Clinic's publication titled 'Online Abuse: Virtual violence and its impact on young women and girls,' which is also part of the DELTA series.

Women and children are most impacted by interpersonal violence. This doesn't mean that boys aren't impacted. Certainly, both boys and girls who witness interpersonal violence (and/or woman abuse) are negatively impacted. And for those who are further marginalized, the impact of abuse can be even greater (e.g., if you are a First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI) youth, racism and colonialism may limit your access to resources, thus making receiving supports or leaving an abusive relationship more difficult). But young women in particular face high risks of violence, and specifically sexual violence. According to the Canadian Women's Foundation, young Canadians are more likely to experience sexual assault. The rate of sexual assault for Canadians age 15 to 24 is 18 times higher than that of Canadians age 55 and older.

Dating and relationship violence can have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of girls and young women. Substantial numbers of boys and young men use physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual violence, and financial abuse against their female partners. Viewed through an ecological framework (systems and social norms), the cause of violence falls into three broad categories: rigid gender roles and relations; social norms that support violence; and access to resources and supports (e.g., inequality)

Raising awareness of interpersonal violence is important for youth, but it is not as effective (by itself) as other approaches, in which young people have an opportunity to learn about the causes of violence, and explore their feelings and what they can do to make changes. Building the skill of **empathy** is an important part of preventing violence. Youth also need skills to communicate effectively and negotiate complex relationships, which can help to reduce conflict. And youth need skills that support help-seeking. All of these skills – including empathy, communication skills, flexible gender roles, awareness of healthy relationships, and **help-seeking** – help to build

skills, flexible gender roles, awareness of healthy relationships, and **help-seeking** – help to build resiliency.

Meanwhile, it is also important to understand the **social norms** that promote violence. Often, social and cultural norms leave youth without support in their efforts to have happy and healthy relationships. In communities where gender is more flexible, for instance, violence against women occurs less often.





### Growing up with violence:

Sadly, many children and young people experience violence in their homes. In fact, one in four young people report having witnessed an act of physical violence against their mother or stepmother.

According to both police-reported and self-reported data, younger women are at a much higher risk of violent victimization. Consider the following facts and figures:

- Just under 9 million (or about 1 in 3) Canadians say they have experienced abuse before the age of 15.<sup>3</sup>
- Nearly 760,000 Canadians said they have experienced unhealthy spousal conflict, abuse, or violence in the previous five years.<sup>3</sup>
- The rate of violent crime against women aged 15 to 24 is 42% higher than the rate for women aged 25 to 34, and nearly double the rate for women aged 35 to 44.<sup>4</sup>
- Women living with physical and/or cognitive impairments experience violence two to three times more often than women living without impairments. Among women with a disability, 60% experience some form of violence.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember that family violence is a community problem (or a Canadian problem) – not simply an individual problem. Children who witness violence (or experience violence by their parents or other family members) are at a greater risk for experiencing violence in their own relationships. Adult relationships are shaped in important ways by the social norms and practices that men and women assume during their adolescent and childhood years. But learning about healthy relationships can change relationship paths and prevent abuse in adult relationships.

Attitudes of disrespect drive violence, so it's important to see the links between disrespectful attitudes and violence. Early interventions that support healthy relationship skills in children and youth can have a lasting effect on a young person's ability to build and maintain healthy relationships in the future, and thus improve their quality of life for many years to come.





### Am I in a healthy relationship?

With the support of a counsellor/teacher/social worker, read through the list of healthy and unhealthy behaviours below. It can be helpful to have the support of a trusted counsellor/teacher/social worker, as reflecting on experiences of abuse can trigger distressing feelings. It's important to have support as you heal and reflect on your experiences. You may want to 'checkmark' or highlight the behaviours or experiences that you can relate to.

### Common behaviours in abusive relationships include:

- He calls me and texts me all the time, and he becomes easily frustrated if I don't respond immediately.
- He can make me feel like I don't understand, or that I'm not smart enough, or like I always have the wrong answer.
- He tells me that no one else will or could ever love me.
- He accuses me of flirting and cheating.
- He yells and swears at me.
- He says that couples should share everything, even passwords to email and social media accounts.
- He makes statements that devalue women.
- He puts me down but then says it was just a joke and tells me, 'don't take things so seriously.'
- He makes me feel like his aggressive or angry behaviour is my fault.
- He expects me to always be improving myself, but he never feels that my efforts are 'good enough.'
- If I don't agree with him, he says things like 'you're crazy,' or 'you're too sensitive,' or 'you're making a big deal out of things.'
- I feel like I'm always 'walking on egg shells.'
- He threatens to hurt himself when I talk about ending the relationship.
- He blames me or tries to make me responsible for his problems.
- He feels entitled to make all or most of the decisions in our relationship.
- He sets the standard for how I look, what I wear, and how clean the house is.
- He can be very sweet and funny, but then he has mood swings and becomes very angry quickly.
- He doesn't validate my feelings or concerns, and he makes comments like, "just get over it."

- He feels like he has the right to control my time and my choices.
- Nothing I do ever feels ‘good enough’ for him.
- I find myself quietly questioning whether his behaviour is normal.
- He doesn’t respect when I say ‘no,’ whether it’s about simple things like spending time together or a sexual activity that makes me feel uncomfortable.
- He criticizes me often. But then he says he’s just trying to make me a better person.
- He makes comments in front of others that embarrass and humiliate me.
- He pressures me to have sex when I don’t want to, or he tries to go further than I want to.
- I bounce back and forth between feeling special and feeling unsafe in the relationship.
- He’s physically abusive (he shoves, pushes, chokes, punches and slaps me, and he holds me down and throws things at me.)
- He expresses his anger in intimidating ways (by slamming doors, his fists on tables, or punching holes in walls). Then he says it’s not abuse, because he didn’t ‘hurt’ me physically.
- He’s not well-liked by my friends and family.
- He threatens to damage or destroy things that I care about, or to hurt someone I care about.
- He says I’m too involved in different activities.

#### Behaviours in healthy relationships include:

- He is supportive of my goals and interests.
- He listens to me when I need to talk something through.
- He understands that I need my own time (either alone or with friends and family).
- He has his own friends and is well-liked by mine.
- He has his own goals and dreams, and he says it’s okay if we have different interests.
- He asks for and respects my opinion.
- He is genuinely happy for me when good things happen, or when I achieve my goals.
- He always asks my permission before tagging me in photos.
- I feel safe and respected in our relationship.
- Although we are open about how and what gets shared on social media, we always negotiate the lines of privacy and we both agreed when to post our relationship status.
- Decision-making feels balanced. We take turns or



negotiate until we both find a solution that makes sense for both of us.

- He's respectful of my sexual boundaries. He asks often for consent. He never makes assumptions about what kind of sexual activity I want or would be comfortable with.
- I never feel intimidated by him.
- He takes good care of himself: he uses alcohol responsibility, avoids drug use, and values a healthy lifestyle (eating well, getting enough sleep and exercise).
- He works towards achieving goals and uses problem-solving to get past barriers.
- He can ask for help when he needs it.
- He expresses empathy when I or others are feeling hurt, disappointed, or scared.
- He values responsible sexuality and takes responsibility for birth control by using condoms to reduce risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).





## WORKSHEET: IDENTIFYING SUPPORTIVE AND RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

It is important to look for the hidden social norms that promote disrespect and the devaluing of women, girls and others who do not meet the 'ideal' of our dominant culture. With a counsellor, go through the comments below and put a check mark beside the ones that you believe are respectful (leave unchecked the comments you believe are disrespectful).

### Comments:

"You will know when you're ready, and we don't have to do anything that you're not into."

"He's fine with me hanging out with other friends, and he knows it's up to me who I spend time with because we accept that we might gel with different people."

"We don't talk about who we've been with sexually. I do know who he's dated before. It's a small school and it can feel a little awkward sometimes, but I do like that he speaks respectfully about his last girl-friend."

"I worry that if I'm not more sexual soon, he will break up with me. He says he thought I was more mature and he feels misled."

"He gets angry when I go do stuff with other people. He says I'm being selfish. He says I flirt."

"He called me a bitch, but then said it was a joke, just to see how upset I would get. He said real feminists keep their cool."

"I've had more partners than he has, but he never makes me feel bad about it. He says it's just about us now."

"After I was sexually assaulted, I acted out a lot, took risks and made some not-so-safe choices. My girl-friend never makes me feel bad about it, she just says she wants me to be safe."

"When I was at the pub, this guy hit on me, like a hookup, you know?! I told him I needed more than a few hours to feel safe with someone. He gave me his phone number and said to call him anytime for coffee."

"I'm a real tomboy, but she always supports me. She wants me to be me, and not conform to some ideal notion of what it means to be a girl."

"He tells sexist jokes, and tells me not to take life too seriously. I tried to explain that sexist jokes contribute to abuse, but he just laughed."

"He's really a great guy, though."

"I know this isn't okay, but she's made me feel so special, and I just love her so much."

"They were [What's 'they'? The 'times'? Reword to make more clear ☐]so loving and sweet, and the good times are the best I've ever had."



# Safer coping: Learning strategies and self-compassion

Safer coping is simply a term for healthy strategies that reduce feelings of stress. Abusive and unhealthy relationships, and experiences of racism and/or heterosexism can create significant stress and distress. During times of stress and distress, children, youth, and adults use strategies that are available to them. Some coping strategies might work in the short-term but create distress or problems in the long-term (e.g., drinking might 'work' in the short-term, but if continued long-term it could create alcohol dependence). So, it's important to think about safer coping strategies and build these skills whenever possible. We can always learn new and safer ways of coping. It's important not to judge yourself harshly for any unsafe coping strategies that you have used in the past. Be kind to yourself. Be persistent, and ask for help when you are trying to learn healthier/safer ways of coping.

Feeling distress is a natural response to traumatic experiences and events, including abuse. Safer coping can help you navigate through these challenging feelings. Building safer coping skills builds resiliency. This means that the more coping skills you have, the better able you'll be to manage any stressors that come your way.

Youth who don't have strong connections to their family, or who have experienced abuse and/or trauma, often have higher levels of distress. They've also likely had less access to healthy ways of coping. By definition, trauma is an event or experience that overwhelms one's ability to cope. So, it's not surprising that we are willing to take risks when trying to cope when we are feeling overwhelmed. We often feel like we have to do whatever we can to stop distressing feelings. But, rather than feel guilty about your coping strategies, try to remind yourself that you are doing the best that you can. We all make mistakes, and shame is rarely a helpful emotion. Growth can be uncomfortable, and making changes can take time, so it's important that we be persistent and try to be kind with ourselves. And remember, healing and progress do not occur in a straight line.



## HANDOUT: SAFE COPING STRATEGIES

Here is a list of safe coping strategies that you might want to try:

1. Stay in routine with eating, sleeping and exercise. Routine reduces stress.
2. Ask for help! Help-seeking is a sign of resilience. No one heals in isolation.
3. Try being curious rather than being critical of yourself.
4. Be self-compassionate. Being hard on yourself is rarely helpful.
5. Monitor self-talk. Are you being kind and encouraging with yourself?
6. Pretend that you like yourself. The feelings will follow.
7. Delay (e.g., delay self-harm or substance use as long as you can).
8. Let go or distance yourself from unhealthy relationships.
9. Imagine a safe place, and notice how you feel. Revisit this place in your mind daily.
10. Be gentle and encouraging with yourself. Change takes time and persistence.
11. Stay in problem-solving mode.
12. Make yourself a priority. Healing takes time and energy, so scale back from other activities.
13. Limit worry. After having the same worrying thought four or five times, there's not much more you can learn from an event or situation. Then, distract yourself to break the pattern of rumination (thinking about something over and over again).
14. Contain your difficult emotions. Allow yourself to feel sad/worried/mad for 30 minutes. Then, change your activity and try to get 'outside of your own head.' Remember that no feeling lasts forever.
15. Find a community. We all need others. Family by chance, friends by choice, as the saying goes.
16. If someone doesn't love you, know that it's about their own inability or lack of capacity (and not a reflection of you as a person).
17. Let go of blame and move towards understanding.
18. Breathe slowly, walk slowly, and soften your muscles.
19. Rethink things! Changing your thinking is one path to resiliency. Adopt thinking that is helpful. Ask yourself: Is my thinking helpful? Or is it adding to my distress?
20. Distance yourself from unsafe people and places.
21. Leave a bad scene. If you have grown up in an abusive home, staying in abusive situations may have been normalized. Trust your instincts and leave situations, places, and people that create distress!
22. Be persistent in finding safe coping strategies that work for you.
23. Be flexible in your thinking and your own identity. There are many right answers and many right ways to do things. Just because you were, doesn't mean that you'll always be.
24. Name your strengths and build on them!
25. Eat healthy food, and get good sleep!
26. Slow down your decision-making. Ask for more time and imagine potential consequences.
27. Imagine yourself being happy, having healthy relationships, and working towards your goals.
28. Monitor your exposure to sources of stress (e.g., certain websites, social media groups, and the news).
29. Step back from feeling responsible for the emotions and problems of others.
30. Be mindful of rigid gender roles. Be flexible in your thinking about male and female roles.
31. Allow time for safety and trust to build in a relationship. People can pretend, but not forever.
32. Be who you are, not what others expect or want you to be.
33. Name your feelings. Allow time to check in with your feelings throughout the day.
34. Connect with people who validate your experiences and empathize with your distress.
35. Notice when you feel accepted and included.
36. Walk, run, play.

37. Build safety and trust first, then disclose personal information slowly.
38. Practice, practice, practice! It takes time to build safe coping skills, so give yourself time to practice any new skill or habit that you are trying to adopt.
39. Identify a particular belief, and then ask yourself where it came from.
40. Stay with your feelings. Tolerate, tolerate, tolerate. Remember that no feeling lasts forever.
41. Notice what you can influence.
42. Identify and name racism, sexism, ableism and heterosexism when you experience them.
43. Stay in the right here, right now. Don't rehash the past, and don't worry about the future. Focus on the present.
44. Make a plan, write a list.
45. Take online abuse and violence seriously. It is a legitimate source of stress and can even be more stressful than 'offline' relationships.
46. Unplug! You don't have to be available or connected to social media 24/7.
47. You have a right to be happy. Happiness isn't necessarily an achievement. Find out what your formula for happiness is. It's often connected to good friends, positive self-regard, and pleasurable activities.
48. Systems and institutions are complex. It can take time and energy to navigate and get to the resources that you need. Advocate for yourself or ask others to help advocate for you and with you.
49. Notice and name healthy and supportive relationships in your life, then name stressful relationships: allot your time accordingly.
50. Remember, mistakes are a part of learning! Be persistent and be kind to yourself as you learn new skills.



# Identity and growth: Developing your identity, creating your own story

We're all impacted by gender expectations. These expectations come from social norms, meaning that we come to believe that, for instance, some behaviours/feelings/thoughts are predominantly female or male in nature. In fact, gender is a culturally and socially created set of expectations for men, women, boys and girls.

These expectations can have a powerful impact on our lives. We receive these messages about gender from a variety of sources, including our families, schools, peers, social media, music, and government and religious institutions. But the more flexible we are in how we view gender expectations, the more resilient we can be.

A recent research study, led by James Maholic at Boston College, identified what our dominant North American culture values in each gender:

Per the study results, young women are expected to:

- Put other people's needs first
- Be responsible for the wellbeing of others
- Be responsible for making sure that relationships are healthy and happy
- Be sexy, but not too sexy (e.g., 'slutty')
- Make their boyfriends happy
- Be nurturing and caring
- Be cooperative, accommodating, and passive
- Be nice
- Be thin
- Be modest
- Use all available resources for one's appearance

Meanwhile, the research study results showed, young men are expected to:

- Initiate sex
- See sex as a game of conquest
- Be strong, dominant, and protective
- Not be virgins
- Be protectors and strong

- Not show fear, vulnerability, or weakness
- Control their emotions
- Put work first
- Use violence when necessary
- Pursue status

## How flexible gender roles contribute to resiliency:

Social norms and gender expectations can limit what we do with our lives (including what careers we choose) and create internal conflict if our own unique personalities don't line up with the gender expectations of our dominant culture or community.

Gender expectations can also be dangerous. For example, if a young man feels pressured to 'not be a virgin,' he may try to pressure or coerce a young woman to have sex. As discussed, coercion is a form of violence that involves emotionally pressuring someone to do something they don't want to do. While no physical force may be used, it is still a form of violence. In other words, coercing a young woman to engage in unwanted sexual activity is sexual assault, even if no physical force is used.

(Note: For more information on coercion and abuse, see the resource 'Helping an Abused Woman: An Essentials Guide,' which is also part of the DELTA series).

If we want a society where equality is valued, we need to understand how rigid gender stereotypes limit our full potential. In the same way that we appreciate different personalities (e.g., funny, playful, smart, talkative, quiet, engaging, artistic, etc.), we need to accept that an individual's gender is just as valid and worth appreciating. There's nothing inherently wrong with 'traditional' gender roles, but we need to recognize that gender is complex and there are many choices. In other words, we can create identities that align with who we are (as opposed to what our dominant culture tells us we should be).<sup>5</sup>



We know that social isolation (not having close relationships, friends, family, and/or community support) is a risk factor for the development of both mental and physical health problems. But our gender ideals/stereotypes about men (that they are less capable of emotional connections than women) puts them at risk for social isolation and the resulting emotional and physical consequences. This is another clear example of how rigid gender roles can be harmful.

Regarding emotions, certainly, sometimes ‘turning off’ our emotions is necessary. But if we’re encouraged to live this way all the time, it can lead to illness. Some of us come from families where expressing emotions was discouraged or invalidated. The dominant culture also plays a role in how we think about emotions – for instance, by reducing or increasing stigma towards those who express their feelings and emotions and allow themselves to be open with others. If we want people to feel okay expressing their emotions, we need to eliminate phrases like ‘man up’ or ‘stop acting like a girl.’ Opening up and being vulnerable is actually courageous. Taking small risks to open up gives us a broader experience of all our emotions, and it allows us to make deeper connections with people. This is important, as healthy relationships and emotional expression can create conditions for resiliency throughout our lifetime. <sup>6</sup>

If we are not fully conscious of the messages that our dominant society tells us, we can internalize them and carry those messages as part of our identity. Some ideas about ourselves (and the world) can be helpful, but many others are not.

### The importance of validation:

If we have experienced abuse (or marginalization), we are more likely to have feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame. This can impact our self-concept or our identity. Sometimes we can be left with a sense of helplessness, even when we find ourselves in new situations with more choice and greater control. You may want to challenge yourself by asking the following question: What choices do I have? Looking at options and brainstorming solutions is an important skill. It is central to problem-solving. If this hasn’t been modeled for you, you may want to connect with a counsellor or social worker for additional support. Asking for help,

after all, is an important step in building resiliency.

If you have grown up in a family, neighbourhood, or school system that was neglectful, and where adults were not attentive to you while growing up, understanding yourself and building your identity can be more challenging. Experiences of violence/abuse or sexism/racism have the opposite effects of validation. In fact, those experiences are profoundly invalidating. Here are some examples of invalidating messages that children/youth can receive:

- “I control you.”
- “Control yourself.”
- “You’re doing it all wrong.”
- “Don’t think, don’t feel, just do as I say.”
- “Just get over it.”
- “Just ignore him.”
- “It’s not that bad. There are others who have it worse ...”
- “Why did you do that? You should just ...”
- “If you get hurt, it’s your own fault.”
- “You think you have it bad ...”
- “You’re too sensitive!”
- “Life’s not fair, get used to it.”
- “Look how upset she is ... she’s crazy!”
- “You should just leave that relationship.”

On the other hand, when children have access to attentive adults (e.g., adults who notice a child’s strengths and the activities that they enjoy – like art, soccer, drawing, music, etc.), the child receives feedback about their interests and strengths. And it’s through this noticing and validating that a child/youth (or young adult) begins to understand themselves, including their own likes, dislikes, skills, and emotions. Validation is the process by which someone notices your feelings, strengths, and challenges, and responds in a supportive way. Here are some examples:

- “You look sad today, what’s up?”
- “You look so happy when you’re on the soccer field!”
- “Your whole face lights up when you’re on stage!”
- “No wonder you are so upset ... you were bullied, and that’s not okay!”
- “What do you need to feel better?”
- “What is getting in your way?”
- “You did the best you could with what you knew at





the time.”

- “I’m really proud of how resilient you are. You’ve been through some really challenging experiences.”
- “You can come to me any time.”
- “How is this affecting you?”
- “I’m sorry you had to go through that.”
- “Can you tell me more?”
- “What can I do to help you get through this?”
- “I think you did the best you could.”
- “I believe you.”
- “You have choices, can I help you walk through them?”
- “It won’t always feel this bad.”
- “Your reaction is normal ... it’s the situation that’s abnormal!”
- “You can share when you’re ready.”
- “You have the right to change your mind.”
- “You are very brave.”
- “Keep going, you can do it.”



All of these statements validate a child's/youth's experience, and each gives them information about who they are, and what they are feeling and/or experiencing. It is through this process that we build our sense of self. If you haven't had these types of validation experiences, you can seek them out. Take notice of teachers, social workers, counsellors, friends, coaches, or family members who have these skills and can support you on your path to getting to know yourself.

With a counsellor, identify comments that you have heard (or even experienced directly) that are invalidating, and then name the feeling that the comment created. You might even link your examples to systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, or heterosexism).

Event or situation	Invalidating comment	Feeling identified	Larger system of oppression
Example: A young woman experiences a 'cat call' while walking down the hallway at school.	E.g., 'It's just a joke'	Anger	Sexism



# Putting it all together: Reflective summary

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**Instructions:** Reflect back on what you have read and the exercises that you have completed within this resource. You have learned a lot about yourself and the world around you. These are the things that make you who you are.

The systems that affect me:

Where I hold privilege:

Where I experience marginalization:

Safe coping strategies that work for me (create a list):

The healthy people, relationships and supports in my life (list them):

What parts of my identity make me feel strong and confident? Why do I think that is?

What parts of my identity make me feel 'small' and/or self-conscious? Why do I think that happens?



What are my strengths?

What skills do I have that help build my resiliency? (Some examples might include: identifying and naming heterosexism, racism and ableism; help-seeking; empathy and validation; or flexible gender roles).

We all have a fundamental need to belong. Belonging helps to reduce our experiences of stress. Connection with others and with community is an important part of our wellbeing. But remember, some beliefs and systems can create patterns of isolation for some. Be mindful of times when you might feel isolated (for instance, because of experiences of racism or sexism). Wellbeing is defined as having positive thoughts about one's self and others. It is also defined by our emotional states. Do we feel happy, content, curious, reflective, or excited? Everyone has a right to seek out supports and experiences that enhance their wellbeing.

1. Where do you experience a sense of belonging and acceptance? How does the feeling of belonging impact your sense of wellbeing?

2. When do you feel validated? With whom do you feel valued? We all need to feel noticed, validated, valued, and special. These are universal human needs.

3. What are your strengths? Acknowledging your strengths and unique contributions is an important part of building resilience. Everyone has strengths. Can you think of at least three strengths? (People who focus on their strengths are more likely to achieve goals than people who worry about the things that they struggle with).

4. Name at least two encouraging self-statements that will help you build resiliency in tough times (e.g., 'I've been through a lot, I can get through this too.' ... 'It's not my fault that this happened, but I do have choices and I can reach out for support.', "I can't change that is happened to me, but I can change how I respond now").



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