The Way We Are Now

Executive summary

The state of the UK’s relationships 2015
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Following the publication of *The Way We Are Now* in 2014, Relate, Relationships Scotland and Marriage Care have once again commissioned a representative survey of over 6,000 people throughout the UK to profile the nation’s relationships, offering a rich insight across five areas of our lives.

This unique survey offers us a glimpse of the home lives, working lives and sex lives of people in the UK and offers a perspective on the quality of our relationships with partners, families, friends and colleagues. *The Way We Are Now* offers plenty to celebrate — the vast majority of people enjoy good quality relationships: 87% of people in couples are happy with their relationships; 71% of us enjoy good relationships with our colleagues; and nine out of ten of us report having close friends.

However, it also gives us an insight into the strains people face — with 61% of parents identifying money worries as a top strain on relationships; 22% of workers saying they work more hours than they want to and this damages their health; and one in six people who are disabled or living with long term health conditions reporting that they have no close friends.

For Relate, Relationships Scotland and Marriage Care this is a familiar picture. Our work with individuals, couples and families throughout the UK gives us first-hand experience of how people are working hard to stick together through good times and bad. And *The Way We Are Now* reflects these insights, including the results from a poll of over 450 of our relationship support practitioners.

Digging deeper, our findings tell a story about the interconnectedness of our lives, demonstrating why to consider relationships a purely private matter is to miss the point entirely. Issues traditionally considered to fall within the remit of public policy — such as the state of people’s finances, conditions at work and provision for people who are disabled or living with long term health conditions — have real impacts on our relationships. And conversely our relationships impact these realms — affecting our health, our wellbeing and even our productivity at work. To that end, it’s heartening that politicians, policy makers, and commentators are increasingly recognising that relationships matter.
The Way We Are Now considers relationships in five areas:

**Families**
We explore the diversity of family structures, and consider the challenges families face. We found that almost one in four people (24%) have experienced the breakup of their parents’ relationship, with signs that this can have lasting impacts on relationships. We also found that money worries were a significant cause for concern – especially for parents.

**Partners**
We look at the quality of relationships and what people look for in their partners. Across the generations most people who have a partner (87%) report that this relationship is good, and 50% never or rarely argue. There are some differences across age groups in what people look for in a partner and what signifies commitment, but for people of all ages the top three signs of commitment were sharing problems, exclusivity and getting married.

**Sex**
We explore the importance of and our satisfaction with sex and also consider the impact of technology. Nearly two thirds of us (62%) say our sex life is important, but fewer than half (45%) are satisfied and over half (51%) haven’t had sex in the last month. While the importance we attach to sex is slightly lower for the older and younger generations than for 24–44 year olds, and slightly lower for women than for men, the divides are not that great.

**Work**
We explore our relationships at work, and how our work affects our relationships. The good news is most workers (71%) enjoy good relationships with colleagues. However, many people still feel pulled in different directions by the demands of work and home life. More than a quarter (28%) aged under 35 agreed the ideal employee is available 24 hours a day, and 22% of workers agreed that they work longer hours than they want and it’s damaging their health.

**Friends**
Finally we look at relationships with our friends. Happily, most of us have good friends to support us, and the picture for older people is particularly positive: 81% of people aged 60 or over have good relationships with friends, compared to 75% for those aged under 60. Sadly though, one in ten people say they have no close friends. And those with children and people who are disabled or living with long term health conditions seem to face particular challenges in this area.

Relationships are our bedrock; they see us through the tough times. It’s therefore good news that the majority of us enjoy good relationships with our partners, families, friends and colleagues.

However, as our survey shows, life can put up barriers to relationships – such as money worries and work pressures. And for some groups the barriers seem to be higher – with our findings in relation to people who are disabled or living with long term health conditions offering particularly worrying insight.

When it comes to couple relationships, the majority of us understand the vital importance of communication and sharing problems, and we value commitment, and marriage as a sign of that commitment. And with the advent of equal marriage more of us are now free to choose to express our commitment in the way that suits us best.

However we know our lives are built upon a rich patchwork of relationships and it’s the quality of these relationships overall which will determine whether or not we thrive.

As our practitioner survey confirms, relationships need work. When our attentions are directed elsewhere – to making ends meet, or battling ill-health, or by being chained to our desks – our relationships can suffer. However with the right support, and with the time and energy to invest, we can all enjoy the benefits of strong and healthy relationships throughout our lives.

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\(^1\) In the month before the survey was conducted.
Our 2015 survey in pictures

The UK’s relationships in 2015

- 71% of people with children said that money worries are one of the top strains on their relationships compared to 47% without children.
- 61% of people with children said that sharing problems is a top sign of commitment.
- 1 in 10 have no close friends.
- 81% of those aged 60+ have a good relationship with their friends.
- 51% had not had sex in the last month.
- 1 in 4 employees aged under 35 agree that the ideal worker is available 24/7.
- 71% have a good relationship with their work colleagues.
- Fewer than half are satisfied with their sex life compared to 50%.
- 81% of people with children said that money worries are one of the top strains on their relationships compared to 47% without children.

YouGov survey of 6,512 people aged 16 and over in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Full methodology available at relate.org.uk/waywearenow
About Relate

Relate is the UK’s leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people each year through information, education, support, mediation and counselling. Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society.

We aim to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- delivering inclusive, high quality services that are relevant at every stage of life;
- helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better;
- helping both the public and policy makers to improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

About Relationships Scotland

Relationship Scotland's network of 22 affiliated local services provide relationship counselling, family mediation, child contact centres and other family support services across all of mainland and island Scotland. Our work supports individuals, couples and families experiencing relationship difficulties. Around 30,000 people have contact with our services each year.

We are a national voice for relationship support services and we influence policy and legislative policy development in the area of family life and wellbeing. We support people to live with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy and respectful relationships.

About Marriage Care

Marriage Care is a national charity committed to helping couples build and sustain strong, fulfilling, healthy relationships. We provide marriage preparation and relationship counselling services for thousands of people each year, supporting couples and individuals in both the best and worst of times in their relationships, and have been doing so for nearly 70 years.

We're the largest faith-based relationship support charity in the UK delivering our services through a network of 53 centres, more than 100 counselling locations and the sheer dedication of over 700 professionally trained and accredited volunteers.