

relate  
the relationship people

  
eharmony

# The Way We Are Now 2021

Singles and couples in the UK today



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# Foreword

## Aidan Jones

Relate CEO, July 2021

“ The past year has been extremely challenging in so many different ways. Whether single or in a relationship, long periods of lockdown have had a huge impact on many people’s wellbeing and Relate counsellors have worked tirelessly supporting individuals, couples and families through this extraordinary time.

As restrictions lift and the world begins to open up again, many of us are excited to reconnect with family, partners and friends. But some people are coming out of the pandemic feeling like their self-esteem has deteriorated. And with almost two thirds of our survey respondents agreeing that self-esteem and romantic success are linked, we wanted to explore further how single people and couples are feeling about their relationships and themselves at this moment in time.



We’re proud to be launching this research during Relationships Week 2021. Sometimes we’re so focused on other people that we forget to pay attention to arguably the most important relationship of all: the one with ourselves. That’s why this year our theme for the Week is ‘love yourself’ – because building your own self-esteem, acknowledging what you need and sometimes just ‘being kinder’ to yourself can have a fundamental and positive impact on your relationships and wellbeing.

If you’re affected by any issues raised in this report, please see the final page for a list of services and resources. We’re grateful to eharmony for making this research possible during what is likely to be a pivotal societal moment.



## Methodology

We polled over three thousand people across Britain. This included a nationally representative sample of 2,002 UK adults (18+) and an additional boosted sample of 1,008 people identifying as single. The polling was undertaken by Censuswide and fieldwork was carried out between 28 May – 4 June 2021.

To add further insight from the work which Relate does with both single people and those in relationships, we undertook qualitative research (online focus group) with Relate counsellors to help inform the polling and supplement the quantitative data.

We also reviewed web data from Relate’s site [relate.org.uk](https://relate.org.uk) and data from Relate’s services from between February 2020 and May 2021.

# Foreword

## Romain Bertrand

VP International at eharmony, July 2021

“ Difficult times naturally make us reflect on ourselves and the world around us. Many of us have had a lot more time to consider what we want from life, whether that’s in our careers, way of living, or our romantic relationships.

The hardships of lockdown have been a test for many couples in the last 18 months. It either led to a greater appreciation of one another due to spending more time together or brought to light existing difficulties that needed to be carefully navigated. This pressure has produced positive life changes in some cases, with milestones like getting engaged and planning a family brought forward.

Meanwhile for single people, a largely enforced break from dating ‘in real life’ presented a unique opportunity. Many

took the time to get to know one another digitally – helped by the successful launch of our Video Date feature – whilst others took a step back to consider what they really want to accomplish from a new relationship.

We’ve seen a lot of singles come out of the pandemic a little nervous about dating in person again, but committed to finding more meaningful relationships. This is evidenced in the fact that around a third (30%) of single people in our survey said they have made more effort to learn from previous mistakes in relationships or recognise unhealthy romantic patterns

**“Around a third (30%) of single people in our survey said they have made more effort to learn from previous mistakes in relationships or recognise unhealthy romantic patterns than they did before the Covid-19 pandemic.”**



than they did before the Covid-19 pandemic.

At eharmony, we know that for two people to really work together they ideally need to share core values and personality traits, and we hope that the opportunity for reflection has helped single people appreciate key aspects of this truth.

As we enter freer times, it will be fascinating to observe new dating patterns. Above all, whether you’re searching for new love or cultivating your relationship across the years ahead, we sincerely hope you enjoy the journey. ”

# Love yourself - the importance of self-esteem

A key finding from our research shows that just under two thirds (64%) of UK adults agree<sup>1</sup> that self-esteem is linked to success in a romantic relationship, with this figure jumping to three quarters (75%) of those aged 18-24 and 78% of those aged 25-34.

The link between self-esteem and romantic success has been the focus of many previous research studies.

One study found evidence to suggest that high self-esteem is beneficial in romantic relationships and furthermore that high self-esteem has a positive effect on the partner's happiness with the relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Another study researched many different types of relationships including parents and peers, romantic relationships and those between colleagues to find that self-esteem enhanced the quality of relationships and having good relationships seems to boost self-esteem.

This was true for both women and men, across all age groups sampled and across different ethnicities.<sup>3</sup>

There's no denying that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on us all, whether in a relationship or single. We've seen the pandemic seriously test people and it's easy to then seek validation from others.

Almost a quarter (23%) of UK adults say that their self-esteem has decreased<sup>4</sup> since before Covid-19 with women (30%) feeling this more so than men (15%) and single people (27%) feeling this more significantly.



1 This finding combines respondents who said 'strongly agree' or 'somewhat agree'

2 Erol, Ruth & Orth, Ulrich. (2016). Self-Esteem and the Quality of Romantic Relationships. *European Psychologist*. 21. 274-283. 10.1027/1016-9040/a000259

3 H Harris, M. A., & Orth, U. (2019, September 26). The Link Between Self-Esteem and Social Relationships: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000265>

4 This finding combines respondents who said 'somewhat decreased' or 'significantly decreased'



The reasons why people feel this way are varied and include:

- not being able to see family and friends (48%);
- money worries (42%);
- not prioritising physical health (40%).

We all know the power of social media and one in five (20%) respondents whose self-esteem has decreased compared to pre-pandemic say that comparing themselves to others online has a negative impact as to how they feel about themselves. Interestingly this was nearly twice as common for women (24%) compared to men (13%).

**20%**  
of respondents say comparing themselves to others online had a negative impact



*“People’s anxieties are definitely higher as we come out of lockdown. I’m hearing from a lot of people who want to work on themselves.”*

– Gurpreet Singh, Relate Counsellor

These findings are supported by Relate’s own web data with a page on [relate.org.uk](https://relate.org.uk) focusing on low self-esteem seeing a 125% increase in views in April and May 2021 compared to the previous month.<sup>5</sup>

However it’s not all doom and gloom. One in five (20%) UK adults have come out of lockdown with increased self-esteem.<sup>6</sup> They attribute this to:

- paying more attention to their physical health (33%);
- taking up a new hobby (23%);
- realising how strong they are after getting through a pandemic (24%).

<sup>5</sup> This finding is based on a 125% increase in page views between 25 April – 24 May 2021 compared to period of 26 March – 24 April 2021.

<sup>6</sup> This finding combines respondents who said ‘somewhat increased’ or ‘significantly increased’.

# Being single in 2021 - the rise of the self-help generation?

Relate counsellors told us that more often they are seeing younger clients accessing information and help online. We wanted to unpack this further to find out how widely single people are accessing self-help tools and looking to learn from previous relationships to make more informed decisions for their future.

It seems that self-help strategies employed during lockdown have fuelled more single people feeling empowered and ready to find love.

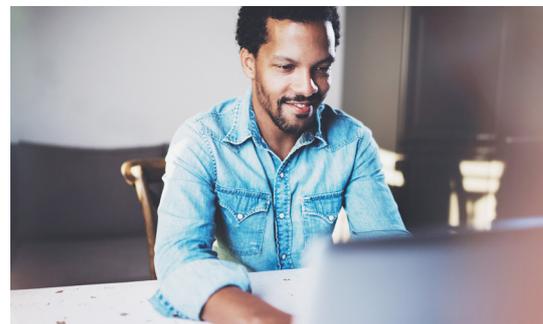
We found that almost a third (30%) of respondents have made more effort to learn from previous mistakes and/or recognise unhealthy romantic patterns than they had before the pandemic.

It's encouraging to see almost a quarter (23%) are taking proactive steps and using self-help resources – online quizzes, self-help books, advice from wellbeing influencers, podcasts – more frequently. In particular, Gen Z and Millennial singles

(33% aged 18–24 and 31% aged 25–34) are accessing self-help tools more coming out of the pandemic.

In addition Relate's own data shows that the number of 18–34 year olds attending counselling on their own at Relate has increased by 7% since before the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

*“Social media can be a toxic place, sometimes being so unhelpful around unrealistic body imagery, for example. However, some therapy and mental health-focussed content has become really helpful for some women...I think a lot are seeing the odd infographic*



*or meme and are coming forward for counselling with an informed viewpoint, like 'I think I may have anxious attachment; I've just seen some information about this'. I also see that some younger women who, because of the communities they are joining online, are far less tolerant of some negative behaviours from other people. I feel there's more awareness and more conversations are happening for younger women about what is and isn't okay.”*

– Natasha Silverman, Relate Counsellor

<sup>7</sup> This finding compares the monthly averages of 18–34 year olds accessing Relate's counselling services on their own from February 2020 to May 2021.

# Confident singles looking to find ‘the one’

A key finding from our survey shows that as restrictions lift a large number of single people (42%) are keen to enter into romantic relationships as we emerge from lockdown.<sup>8</sup>

Even last year, during the initial lockdown, there was an evident surge towards intimate connection. eharmony registrations were up 60% year-on-year in the first week of April 2020, mirroring the level of growth seen in January and February which is typically peak season. Messages on the app increased by just over half (51%) too.<sup>9</sup>

Today, the reasons for wanting to dust off the dating shoes are varied. A quarter of single people (25%) say that since restrictions have eased there's lots of choice on the dating scene and they are keen to date all types of people. Over a quarter (28%) of respondents claim that following the pandemic they have a better sense of what they need from

a relationship, with 24% of people ‘not wanting to waste any more time’ on the dating front. A large number of single people (39%) said that coming out of lockdown they are open to meeting ‘the one’.

*“Some of the conversations I’ve been having with some of my younger, single, female clients are around ‘I’m not wasting time now, I’m not going to date someone for a long period of time who isn’t right for me; I’m not going to hope they become the person that I need. These are my values, this is what I’m looking for and if I can’t find that in him, or her, then ‘next!’ I have noticed that there are a lot of ‘irons in the fire’ for some clients at the moment.”*

– Natasha Silverman, Relate Counsellor



<sup>8</sup> Respondents said they were keen to enter into ‘short but intense’ romantic relationships as lockdown lifts.

<sup>9</sup> According to analysis of eharmony profile and communication data.

# Thoughts about sex

With more people looking for love and lockdown lifting, we wanted to delve deeper into single people's thoughts about sex.

We found:

- 10% say that they enjoy masturbation more than sex with a partner;
- 25% think they are out of practice in the bedroom – slightly more so for women (27%) than for men (24%);
- 13% don't feel ready to be intimate again;
- 8% are now more open to exploring same-sex relationships than they were before the pandemic.



**25%**  
of respondents  
think they are  
out of practice  
in the bedroom



*“Lockdown was hard for a lot of people, but it also gave singles the time to work out who they are and what they’re looking for in a partner. And, while it’s only natural that some people feel nervous about having sex again, lockdown has also created a boom in more meaningful dating, with people*

*keen to find real substance. At eharmony, we’ve seen this kind of thing happening before – traumatic environmental events invariably lead to spikes in dating and people wanting to connect deeply with each other.”*

– eharmony relationship expert Rachael Lloyd

# eHarmony's and Relate's tips for building self-esteem



**Next time you aren't perfect, acknowledge it, accept it and then let it go.** Loving and accepting ourselves is one of the hardest things we can learn to do. It's about accepting our own flaws and failures without letting them define us.



**Try talking to yourself how you'd talk to someone else.** In all likelihood you'd probably be a lot kinder to someone else who came to you with a problem than you are to yourself.



**Take things at the right pace for you.** Whether that's dating someone, reconnecting with family and friends or just getting out and about again; we're all at different stages coming out of lockdown and that's okay.



**Make yourself a priority.** Carve out time to do the things you love. Self-care is an important part of looking after your wellbeing.



**Talk to someone.** If you're struggling coming out of the pandemic, know that you're not alone. Find someone to talk to about it. This could be a partner, friend or a counsellor.



**You don't always need external validation.** Sometimes our own recognition and acceptance is enough.



**Step outside of your comfort zone.** You're capable of more than you think!



**Remember how to have fun.** The past year has been challenging for so many people. Try to do things which you enjoy and see the people who make you happy.



# Key findings

Key findings from Relate's and eharmony's *The Way We Are Now 2021* report, released during Relationships Week (5-11 July). The theme of the Week is 'love yourself' and the polling focuses on the state of self-esteem, love and relationships as we emerge from the pandemic.

**Relationships  
Week 2021**

Based on nationally representative polling of 2,002 UK adults (18+).  
A boost of 1,008 UK singles was added to this sample.

## #LoveYourself

**64%**

of UK adults think that self-esteem and romantic success are linked



**20%**

of UK adults feel that their self-esteem has increased since pre-pandemic



**23%**

of respondents feel that their self-esteem has decreased since pre-pandemic



**20%**

of those whose self-esteem has decreased say comparing themselves to others online had a negative impact



## Self-help singles

**28%** of single people agree they now have a better sense of what they want from a relationship than they did pre the Covid-19 pandemic



**42%** of single people admit they are entering short but intense romantic relationships since restrictions have relaxed



**23%** are using more self-help resources. Increasing to **33%** for Gen Z singles aged 18-24



**24%** say this is because they don't want to waste any more time finding love



## Coming out of lockdown in a relationship\*

\*those who have been in a relationship for over a year

**30%** of couples say the quality of their relationship has improved since before the pandemic



**37%** whose relationship has improved said this was due to having more open and honest conversations with their partner



**42%** of those whose relationship has improved equate this to having more one-to-one time with their partner



# The state of Britain's couple relationships

There's been a lot in the media about couples struggling during lockdown and of course this is the case for some, however our findings show that close to a third (30%) of respondents in long-term relationships<sup>10</sup> feel that the quality of their relationship is actually better<sup>11</sup> than it was pre-pandemic.

We found that 45% of respondents whose relationship has got better feel like they are more of a team with their partner now. Having more valuable time with your 'other half' was also seen as a positive with 42% equating this to having a better quality relationship overall.

We found in our focus group that counsellors were seeing a larger number of people feeling the need to be 'more honest' with their partners and this often correlated to life feeling short coming out of the pandemic.

We delved into this further and found that 37% of those whose relationships have improved are having more open and honest conversations with their partners

and that this in turn is leading to them seeing an improvement in the quality of their relationships.

*"I'm seeing more people who are feeling that life is short. So many people have died and there's a real sense of mortality which is driving people to be honest with themselves but also with their partners."*

– Holly Roberts, Relate Counsellor

**37%**



**of respondents whose relationship improved are having more open and honest conversations with their partners**



<sup>10</sup> Sample is those in a relationship for a year or longer.

<sup>11</sup> This finding combines respondents who said 'much better' or 'somewhat better'.

# Speeding up milestones

**For those in a relationship, a significant minority are keen to take it to the next level.**

In the next six months, one in ten (10%) couples want to go on holiday together for the first time, 7% are planning to buy a house together and 7% plan to try for a baby.

A small percentage of respondents (4%) are planning to say 'I love you' to their partner for the first time. Interestingly more than half of the respondents who are planning to move their relationship onto the next level think that the pandemic has sped up their plans.

*“Ultimately, it’s shared interests, values and goals that make for a successful relationship. Lockdown acted as a ‘make or break’ scenario for many, which is why I’m not surprised that many couples who went the distance are now keen to show their commitment to one another.”*

– eharmony relationship expert Rachael Lloyd

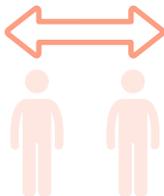


# The longer-term effects of the pandemic on relationships

As we come out of a third lockdown and the world begins to open up, some of those in long-term relationships (13%)<sup>12</sup> are left feeling that the quality of their relationship has worsened through the pandemic.

We found that one in ten (10%) respondents agreed that having more time apart due to lockdown lifting will help their relationship and 12% of those in relationships say that their sex life has got worse during the pandemic.

**10%**  
of respondents  
agreed that having  
more time apart  
due to lockdown  
lifting will help  
their relationship



It's also likely that the long-term effects of Covid-19 on the nation's relationships are yet to be seen. Our focus group found that counsellors predict many people will still have to face the longer-term impact of the pandemic on themselves and on their relationships in the months and years to come.

*"Some couples found their relationship improved because the physical distance between them in their busy lives had been removed by lockdown... they were in holiday mode in a way. So I think it's going to be interesting to see what happens when all of those obstacles come flying back again."*

– Natasha Silverman, Relate Counsellor



<sup>12</sup> Sample is for those in a relationship for a year or longer.

# eHarmony's and Relate's tips for improving your relationship in 2021

-  **Try to stop comparing your relationship to other people's** or at least notice when you're doing it. Every relationship is unique and no relationship is perfect.
-  **Give your relationship the same care you give your car or your health with an annual relationship MOT or health check.** Talk about what you want from your relationship now and in the future. Do this with Relate if it's hard to do by yourselves.
-  **Focus on keeping your commitments and promises to yourself and to others.** This will help to build trust which is vital for healthy relationships.
-  **Remember to keep the positives from lockdown.** Enjoyed family walks or spending more quality time with your partner over the past 12 months? Build them into your routine so that you continue to do them.
-  **Got something tricky to talk about?** Go out to a quiet café or better still go for a walk; even reluctant talkers can find it easier to speak when not sitting in the house staring at each other.
-  **It's really easy to be critical of your partner** especially if you've been together more than normal due to restrictions. Instead, try to tell them what you love about them and all the things they do that you appreciate. It will be good for their self-esteem and your relationship.
-  **Value your independence.** Being independent can improve your feelings of self-worth. Try doing new things or have a go at doing something or making a decision on your own.
-  **Be honest with yourself.** If something isn't working, set time aside to talk about it. If you need to do this with a third party, Relate can help.



# Conclusion

It's clear to see that the pandemic has had a huge impact on people's lives, health and wellbeing.

And Relate counsellors predict that the longer-term effects of Covid-19 on ourselves and our relationships will continue to unfold in the coming months and years.

*"I think there's a general trend in which the help of psychologists and therapists is being sought, including looking at Relate's own stats: Relate has peaks in enquiries post-holidays and post-Christmas. This shows that many people get in touch not in the 'eye of the storm', but after the storm has passed. If you follow that trend, we're still coming out of the storm so the full impact is yet to come through and I don't think we know half of it yet."*

- Gurpreet Singh, Relate Counsellor



# Help with relationships, self-esteem and dating



## Relate services

We could all use some extra support sometimes. Relate has a range of services which include individual counselling, relationship counselling for couples and individuals, family counselling, mediation, children and young people's counselling and sex therapy.

In addition, WebChat offers 30 minute sessions with a trained counsellor and Message A Counsellor is an email service where you get a bespoke reply to a specific issue.

To find out more about our services and for a range of online self-help resources including articles and quizzes, visit [relate.org.uk](http://relate.org.uk).

## Relationships Week



Relationships Week 2021 will take place from 5–11 July, bringing together voices from across the UK to highlight the importance of healthy relationships in our lives.

For more information including specific content on self-esteem visit [relate.org.uk/relationships-week](http://relate.org.uk/relationships-week).

## eharmony services



Real love remains at the heart of everything we do at eharmony. In an increasingly fast-paced dating culture, we take a more bespoke and supportive approach to creating relationships. Our unique Compatibility Matching System brings together like-minded singles who share core values and personality traits, which are key indicators of relationship success.

We're constantly evolving our matching system, designed by psychologists, which measures each member's profile across 32 dimensions of compatibility – factoring in traits such as kindness, openness, and communication style. The results speak for themselves – every 14 minutes someone finds love on eharmony.

Take our virtual tour at [eharmony.co.uk](http://eharmony.co.uk).