Seeking out relationships with others is a natural part of life. We all have different needs when it comes to connections we make based on who we are and how we function in the world. Some of us may seek out one or two close friends and cherish our 'alone time'. Others may seek out as many friends as possible and thrive when in the company of others. Some of you may seek out solely platonic relationships while others may be looking for love and romance. Regardless of what you were like prior to coming to IMSA, you may find your relationship needs shifting and changing once you arrive.

Why, you may ask, does it seem to matter so much to me that I am accepted by others? Well, it may just have to do with the way we are hard-wired. Check this out:

*Some brain-scan studies, in fact, suggest that our brains react to peer exclusion much as they respond to threats to physical health or food supply. At a neural level, in other words, we perceive social rejection as a threat to existence. Knowing this might make it easier to abide the hysteria of a 13-year-old deceived by a friend or the gloom of a 15-year-old not invited to a party. These people! we lament. They react to social ups and downs as if their fates depended upon them! They’re right. They do.*

It seems, then, that being socially accepted is a part of being human all the way down to the *neural* level. How are you going to turn that off??? This helps to explain why we can’t just cast aside our needs to interact socially with others just because we have a paper to write or a test to study for. Our need for social contact and acceptance can feel just as fundamental as our need for sleep and food. The issue with this comes from the need to find a balance between what you feel is important and what you are expected to keep up with while at IMSA. For some of you this may be a challenge but for others, you may have already started this balancing act prior to arriving on campus.

Once you are on campus, you will have a lot to consider besides just academics. Furman and Shaffer (2003) noted that...

...adolescents face a series of tasks that include (a) the development of an identity, (b) the transformation of family relationships, (c) the development of close relationships with peers, (d) the development of sexuality, and (e) scholastic achievement and career planning.²

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¹ http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/10/teenage-brains/dobbs-text/2

That’s a lot more to worry about than just trying to get into a top university! Given that IMSA students are living away from home AND in an intense academic environment, the difficulty of achieving any or all of these tasks may be increased. Not only are you studying hard and trying to figure out who you are or who you want to be, you’re also away from home and the family life within which you grew up. Trying to figure out sexuality and close peer relationships can feel like too much for some of you and may be put on the back burner for awhile or for the entirety of your IMSA career. For others, it may seem hard to focus on much else. Either way, getting support around the feelings and emotions you experience is paramount to your success. If you or your parents want more information, check out some of these resources:

- Friendships
- Romantic relationships
- Healthy relationships
- Abusive relationships
- Assertive communication
- Advice for parents

You can also talk to a trusted friend or relative (or counselor!). If you enjoy seeing examples of what others have struggled with before you, try seeking out books, movies, or music (ever noticed how many break-up songs there are out there?) that relate to or deal with relationships. Cultural resources like these shouldn’t be used as guides but rather as examples of how others think about and cope with relationships and the difficulties that come with them.

What have other IMSA students experienced while on campus? Let’s ask!

- “...I don't think I would have found as fun or loyal friends anywhere else. Perhaps that constant presence that can drive me nuts is also what makes us like a great big extended family. In the end I don't think i would actually change anything. I'm willing to sacrifice some personal space for three years because once we all disperse in a thousand directions it will be much more meaningful and bittersweet than at any other school.”

- “Having close friends at IMSA is helpful because you form a support group that has gone through similar things that you are going through...Sometimes the choice has to be made between a significant other and schoolwork and there isn't an in-between; you have to choose.” -Class of 2013

No matter what your experience with relationships has been so far, remember that relationships TAKE WORK to maintain and DON’T always work out. Friendships fall apart, boyfriends and girlfriends break up and move on, and it’s not always easy to make sense of your own or someone else’s feelings in these situations. And let’s not forget, we’re at IMSA where you will continue to see these people every day all day just to complicate matters even further.

So what to do?

A couple of suggestions:

- be as honest as you can possibly be in your communication with others about how you feel and what you want in your relationships

- stand up for what you feel is right or wrong in a relationship and get advice from someone you trust if you’re not sure what to do
-try not to judge your friends who are struggling with relationship issues but rather try to understand their struggle and save your advice for when you’re asked for it

-remember that NO ONE wants you to stay in a relationship with them just to avoid hurting their feelings

-someone who cares about you will not try to change who you are or keep you away from others

-and last but not least, relationships with others should make you feel more GOOD than BAD about yourself

Good luck, my fellow relationship-seekers, and remember: when you’re struggling in one relationship the last thing you may want to do is reach out to someone, but keep in mind that making sense of your own or another person’s feeling is usually best done out of isolation.