

Social Support: Getting & Staying Connected

Research has shown that social support wards off the effects of stress on depression, anxiety and other health problems. Do you need to be more connected to others? Here are some tips to help you create a plan to make, keep and strengthen connections in your life:

- Make a short list of friends and family members who are supportive and positive. Also include a list of people you feel the need to stay in touch with regularly such as parents, a close friend or adult child who lives far away, or an aging relative who lives alone.
- Make a commitment to yourself to call, email or get together with them on a schedule that's reasonable for you. Try to reach out to make at least one emotional connection a day, but plan realistically. In cases of long distance, consider using web-based ways of keeping in touch, like Skype or Facebook.
- Share what's on your mind honestly and openly. Talk about your concerns in a straight-forward way, but try to keep it constructive. Try to be direct about what you need – for example a sympathetic ear, help solving a problem, a fresh perspective, new ideas or a good laugh. Don't hesitate to ask for the kind of help you'd like. Ask what other people think about your situation, and show them you value their opinion.
- When you talk, also listen. Ask about someone else's day, or follow up on the topic of a previous conversation. Showing sincere interest in another person's life builds relationships and listening to other people's concerns can often shed a new light on your own challenges. Offer help or advice if asked – listen and respond.
- Make social plans. Create opportunities to strengthen your relationships with fun things that both you and your friend or relative will enjoy. Looking forward to special activities boosts our spirits, gives us energy and makes us more productive.

You may find that among people you hardly know, one or more can become trusted friends you can rely on—and support—in good times and bad. Even if you feel that you're so busy you don't have time to keep up with family and friends you already have, it doesn't take much time to make new friends. If you're shy and hesitant about meeting new people, just a few questions can get a conversation going. Think about neighbors you pass regularly, co-workers, people in your exercise class, a cousin you've lost touch with, or those who volunteer in the same organizations you do. If you don't already have people you can talk with regularly about what's on your mind, it's worth the effort to build connections for your emotional health. If you find yourself anxious or timid about social interaction, you may want to consider talking to a therapist or counselor to build your confidence in social situations.

Did You Know?

- A study that followed participants over the course of 20 years found that a person's level of happiness was related to the happiness of their social networks. If a person had a happy friend who lived within a mile, the person themselves was 25% more likely to be happy as well. In addition, it found that a person's happiness can be related to the happiness of someone separated by up to three degrees (a friend of a friend of a friend).
- Low level of social interaction was found to have an impact on lifespan equivalent to smoking nearly a pack of cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic, and was twice as harmful as being obese.



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- Your body’s chemicals play a role in your social connections. The hormone, oxytocin, influences social behavior by increasing relationship bonds and trust.

Social Media

An increasingly popular way of connecting with others is through social media. While it does not, and should not, replace face-to-face interactions, social media can be a useful tool for keeping in touch with others and staying up-to-date on current events and trends. Before setting up an account on a social media site, you should consider what you’d like to achieve by signing up, and decide how much information about yourself you would like to share so you can adjust privacy settings accordingly. But post with caution – a recent study suggests that using Facebook may cause a decline in life satisfaction, whereas direct social interactions led people to feel better over time.

Facebook: Good for keeping in touch with friends and family; sharing thoughts, videos and photos. You can share with your entire network by posting on your timeline, sending instant messages, or sending private messages. www.facebook.com

Twitter: Keeping up with news and microblogging (telling how you feel or what you’re doing in 140 characters or less) are Twitter’s main uses. www.twitter.com

Pinterest: Online bulletin board that allows you to collect images and videos and share them with others, popular among hobbyists. www.pinterest.com

LinkedIn: This is like Facebook for professionals. Use it to share your resume, look for jobs, and establish and communicate with business networks. www.linkedin.com

Instagram: Used for taking photos, applying interesting and “artsy” filters, and sharing photos with your network. www.instagram.com

When Social Connections Aren’t Cutting It

If you feel overwhelmed, unable to cope, or that stress is affecting how you function every day, consider connecting with a mental health professional. Whether it’s a social worker, pastoral counselor, marriage and family therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist, or other trained professional, getting connected to a professional is the first step to feeling better.

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