

MISSION POSSIBLE: MENTAL HEALTH

Strength in Numbers: Social Support



Close relationships and social connections can be a natural way to manage daily or chronic stress and maintain your mental health and well-being.

When your car breaks down, you're grieving the loss of a loved one, or you're going through a rough time at work, supportive people in your life can rush in to help. Maybe that blown transmission doesn't seem so devastating when your friend is with you in the car. Or perhaps a normally stressful errand feels more like an adventure when your sibling or partner tags along.

Research shows that people with high levels of social support seem to **be more resilient in the face of stressful situations**, have a **lower perception of stress** in general and have **less of a physiological response to life's stressors**.



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Mental Health Toolbox: Tool #4

At some point, pretty much everyone struggles with feeling alone, insecure, or like they just don't fit in. **Use this worksheet to think through what kind of connections are important to you and how you can make sure you have them in your life.**

EXPLORING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Are there friends, loved ones, or pets in your life who make you feel understood? What makes those relationships feel good?

What are times you have felt connected? Were you with certain people, doing a certain activity, or in a certain location?

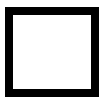
What are some experiences or groups that made you feel like you belonged?

Are there opportunities to get connected, like a program in your community that you can get involved with?

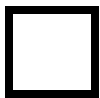
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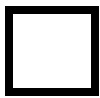
Whether you're dealing with chronic stress or day-to-day frustrations, reaching out to others can be a go-to strategy for managing stress. **Check out these strategies to help you identify your close social connections and create a plan.**



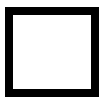
Connect with family or friends: Studies show that people who feel connected to others are less likely to feel anxiety or sadness, reduce stress, and even improve mental health. Make a short list of friends and family members who are supportive and positive.



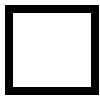
Make social plans. Create opportunities to strengthen your relationships with fun things that both you and your friend or relative will enjoy.



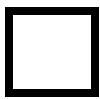
Make a commitment to yourself to call, email or get together with friends and family on a schedule that's reasonable for you. Try to reach out to make at least one emotional connection a day, but plan realistically.



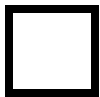
Take advantage of technology. Technology makes it easier than ever before to stay connected with loved ones far away. Write an email, send a text message, or make a date for a video chat.



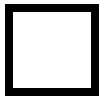
Follow your interests. Do you like to hike, sing, make jewelry, play tennis? You're more likely to connect with people who like the things you like.



Take a class. If you'd like to learn how to improve your cooking or crafting skills, take a class. By opening yourself up to new experiences, you can walk away with more skills and new friends.



Join a support group: Reach out and connect with others who can share strategies for getting through challenging times.



Volunteer at local establishments, such as community centers, or during events like 5Ks or food drives.

ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Write down any additional strategies or resources to build or maintain relationships.

How to Build a Life of Close Connections

Studies have shown that loneliness and social isolation can affect our mental and physical health. It can increase our risk of heart disease, depression, dementia, and other health conditions.

Strong, healthy ties to other people are powerful tools for boosting wellbeing and building a rewarding life. People with solid emotional support usually have more resilience and experience less negative impact from stress. Significant physical and mental health benefits come with staying close to people you care about—your partner, children, friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, and mentors like a teacher, coach, or manager who can help you believe in yourself.

Here are tips on creating—and maintaining—close ties:

Lifetime friendships need your personal attention. Social media may help you stay in touch but it won't keep you close. Saying, "Happy Birthday" on Facebook and 'liking' a friend's post—"these are the life support machines of friendship," says communications expert, Dr. William Rawlins. "They keep it breathing, but mechanically." To keep your friendships going, work at them offline, too. Over the course of a lifetime, people want three things in a friend, Rawlins has found: someone to talk to, someone to depend on, and someone to enjoy.

Be open to getting to know new friends and cultivate your current important relationships. Set up regular times to meet or talk on the phone. Listen and give your friend your full attention when you do; and have fun together. Try to remember details others share with you, including important days like birthdays and anniversaries. As trust develops in a relationship, be willing to share some important information about yourself. Create enduring connections over time—planning a monthly phone call; creating a wish list of things to do together; or, starting a two-person film club by syncing your Netflix queues, watching a movie each month that you both want to see, and then talking about it afterward.

As a couple, after a fight, put it right. All couples disagree at times and relationships change over time. But remember that relationships can survive—"even if you think you are from different planets," says couples therapist Dr. Sue Johnson—as long as there is an emotional connection. "So after a fight, put it right," she says. Repair the damage and heal the rift between you. Give extra hugs. Reassure your partner of your love. And if you weren't communicating well, set aside 15 or 20 minutes a day to talk. Missteps are inevitable, and forgiveness is important in any relationship you value. The most important thing to do is to stay emotionally available and open to keeping your bond strong.

Connect with co-workers. Friendships at work make for a happy work-life experience. Why not take the initiative in connecting with co-workers? Schedule periodic or regular time together. Pick up the phone to see how someone is doing. Join in social events like going out for coffee or dinner after work. Plan a social event on the weekend with co-workers you'd like to get to know. Respect boundaries and avoid gossip.

Cherish and strengthen your ties with family. These are often our longest-lasting relationships. Focus on what holds you together, and respect differences of opinion and worldview. Shared rituals are the glue that help to hold families together, even a tradition as small as making pancakes on the weekend or going to a concert once a year. Try to have daily rituals with close family like saying, “I love you,” and have weekly, monthly, or annual ones with those who live far away. Call or send cards on more than birthdays and holidays. Have a set time for quick check-in talks. Short, regular talks do more to keep you close than longer ones at unpredictable intervals, research has found.

Make close ties a priority throughout life. The time and effort you give to important relationships and friendships when you’re young will pay big dividends now and in the future. One study that tracked college students for almost 20 years found that the time friends had invested in each other predicted whether they would be close decades after graduation. Commitment to the relationship and good communication are the two most important factors in keeping close connections.

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