

# Relationships: Friends Keep You Healthy

1st February 2020

Most people know that proper nutrition, exercise, and health checks promote good health, but did you know that friendship is just as important? Statistics show that people who enjoy healthy relationships suffer fewer incidences of cancer, stroke, heart disease, and circulatory disorders. They also live longer.

There are skills and strategies that will improve the quality of your relationships, just as proper exercise and balanced nutrition improve the quality of your physical health.

## Your support network

The people you are close to make up your social support network. Different people in your network satisfy different needs in one of four categories:

1. advice or information
2. material help
3. emotional support
4. companionship

When you build and maintain a social support network, look for people who share, or at least do not contradict, your values. Friends don't have to hold beliefs identical to yours; people often "agree to disagree" or compromise. When a member of your group does something you consider wrong, ask yourself: "Is what my friend did truly wrong—a violation of both their values and mine—or just different from the way I would have handled it?"

Although opinions can vary, positive, nurturing groups have norms that promote and support:

- caring
- communication
- stress management

A caring group shows concern for someone when they are upset. A group with strong communication norms will let its members know how much they are appreciated. And a group with good stress-management norms sets priorities, focuses their efforts, and handles

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stress in a relaxed and constructive way.

## Building a support network

If you've just moved or gone through a major life change like starting a new job, you may find yourself without a support network. Here are some suggestions for reaching out and finding people.

Give the gift of time and attention. Everyone appreciates a friendly ear.

Plan special meals. Invite neighbours or colleagues who live alone to join you.

Get a pet. Walking a pet is a great way to get out in your local area and meet people.

Join a club or group. Become connected with individuals with common interests.

Become a volunteer for an organisation in need. You'll meet new people with shared interests and contribute a valuable service to society.

## Finding comfort in family and friends

Your family can be a great support group if you share a positive relationship, but often we fail to communicate effectively with our loved ones. At the same time, friends can be incredibly important because they are the people you choose to surround yourself with. Maintain both support networks with these tips:

Make time. Spend time with your friends and family. Be sure to set aside dedicated quality time.

Show interest. Listen and give support to everybody you speak to. Try doing things together to show that you care.

Respect each other's differences. Try to speak respectfully about each other's opinions and interests, and ask questions to show that you're engaged and invested in what matters to them.

Keep your word, even in trivial matters. What is only a minor detail to you may mean a lot

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to someone else.

Allow others to shine. When it's someone else's turn in the spotlight, stand up and cheer, but don't butt in.

Be honest, but show tact. Offer criticism only when asked.

Let others have the last word. Maybe you can top their story, but save it for another time.

Like anything else, establishing healthy relationships requires work. It also calls for decided action. Even with the best of intentions, it's sometimes tempting just to let things run their course. The key to successful relationships lies in taking action.

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