

An Introduction to Family, Friends & Coworkers

What do my relationships with friends, family, and co-workers have to do with my health?

It takes just a minute to realize how relationships can affect our emotional, mental, and physical health. First, think back to a time when you had difficulty with a friend, family member, or significant other. How did you feel? How did your feelings show up in your body? Did your heart race, or was your face hot? Were your breaths shallow, and did you feel shaky? It is common for emotions to cause physical reactions. Perhaps that is where the phrase “heartbreak” comes from.

Now, think of a time when you felt supported, loved, and at ease. You may have been with a family member, a close friend, or perhaps a pet. The memory may include pleasant and comforting physical sensations. Maybe your heartbeat slowed and became steady. Or perhaps you felt warmth in your hands or elsewhere in your body. Perhaps you felt a release of tension in your shoulders.

Research helps explain what is happening when we have physical feelings. For example, when we feel lonely and isolated, the stress hormone, cortisol, increases. When we feel loved and supported, the hormone oxytocin increases. The brain also may trigger either the “fight or flight” stress response or the “rest and digest” relaxation response.¹

Stress can affect our daily life in many ways, such as interfering with our digestion and our ability to rest and sleep. Loving and supportive relationships with others can have a protective effect on our bodies when we experience stress. The effect of stress is decreased when we experience love and connection with those we care about. Having close, loving, and supportive relationships can greatly improve our health and well-being.²

If we are under stress and do not have support, our health can worsen. Our health can also worsen if our relationships are stressful. On the other hand, our health may be better if we have supportive and loving people in our lives.^{3,4} Research shows that our relationships can affect our risk of getting a cold, or even having a heart attack.^{5,6}

If relationships have such a big impact on health, what can I do about it?

A good first step is to take a few minutes to think about your relationships. Consider the following questions:

Who are the 5 people who matter most to me?

Who can I count on when I need help?

Who accepts me totally, including both my worst and best parts?

Who can I count on to help me feel more relaxed when I am under stress?

Am I getting the support I need right now? If I am not feeling supported, what can I do?

Your answers to these questions are a good starting point for thinking about how your relationships play a role in your Whole Health. Consider using these notes and take them with you when you talk with someone about this issue. This might be members of your health care team or another counselor or provider.

What are some ways in which I can build positive relationships?

Consider whether the following ideas might be a good fit for you:

Work with your health care team. Consider talking with a mental health provider or social worker. Social workers and case managers can help you find programs in your community. Social workers can help with many types of concerns. These range from financial or marital problems to depression.

Learn about support groups. Support groups are a place where you can discuss day-to-day problems with other people who are facing similar challenges or have been through similar circumstances. They are typically led by a professional or someone like you who has also been through a similar experience. Support groups give you a sense of connection to other people that may help you feel better. There are many types of support groups both online and in person and groups may be focused on different issues such as trauma, substance abuse, grief, or a variety of mental health conditions.

- [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#) offers a list of support groups across the country for a number of different mental health conditions.
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) (NAMI) Information HelpLine provides support, referral, and information on mental illness care. You may also find family support groups in a NAMI state or local affiliate online by calling 1 (800) 950-NAMI (6264).
- [Sidran Institute Help Desk](#) locates support groups for people who have experienced trauma.
- For information on coping with grief, refer to the handout, "[Coping with Grief Following a Death](#)."

Get involved in volunteer work. Research shows that volunteering can improve your health.⁷ This can take many forms. For example, you might volunteer in a school or with an organization such as the United Way. You could volunteer at a food bank or homeless shelter. You might also volunteer through a spiritual or religious organization.

Participate in your community. Being involved in your community can help you build and maintain friendships and support. Consider 1 or more of the following:

- Attend community events, such as celebrations, stage productions, fundraisers, and sporting events.
- Help organize community events (join a steering committee or board).
- Join a spiritual or religious community.
- Participate in the arts, like music or dance groups, or attend concerts.
- Join a community garden.
- Join a gym.

- Take (or teach) a course of some kind.

Connect with animals. Relationships with animals can have similar health benefits to those with people. Animals can help meet our emotional needs.⁸ Taking care of a pet can help decrease stress.⁹ There are several ways to connect with animals, including the following:

- Consider adopting a companion animal. A pet will require time, love, and care, so you may want to consider this carefully. Also, the pet's food and health care can be costly.
- Spend time with someone else's animal. This might be an animal living in your building or the pet of a family member or friend. You might spend time with animals by volunteering at a Humane Society or pet shelter.
- Consider a service animal if you have a condition for which animals are helpful. Some examples include impaired vision, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Explore the possibility of animal-assisted therapy to help aid your physical or mental health.

Start a self-compassion practice, such as compassion meditation. Self-compassion involves 3 parts:¹⁰

1. Self-kindness
2. A sense of common humanity
3. Mindful awareness (Refer to the handout, "[An Introduction to Mindful Awareness](#)," for more information.)

Self-compassion isn't something that you "have" or "don't have." It is a practice, like any other skill. Research shows that self-compassion is an important skill we need to help relate to ourselves and the world.¹¹ Self-compassion is not a self-centered practice. It actually lays the foundation for deeper connections with others. Review the handout, "[Compassion Practice](#)," for how to get started.

For more information about the effect of relationships on your health, refer to the handout, "[Relationships and Health](#)."

For you to consider:

- What did you learn as you worked your way through this handout?
- What aspects of your relationships would you like to explore more?
- Which of the ideas in this handout may be useful to you in building relationships?
- Which ideas appeal most to you? What will you try first?
- Do you want to meet with someone about your relationships? What type of provider would you feel most comfortable talking to? Talking with someone who is experienced in helping people build their relationships can be most effective when you don't know where to start. Feel free to take your notes from this handout when you talk with your health care team or someone else.

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of handouts on relationships and health	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Jonathan Takahashi, MD, MPH, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on the document for clinicians written by J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD, "Passport to Whole Health," and a document for clinicians written by Christine Milovani, LCSW and J. Adam Rindfleisch, MPhil, MD, "Family Friends, and Co-Workers."

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