

Relationships and Health

What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.

– Pericles

How do relationships improve my health?

For 75 years, Harvard University has interviewed hundreds of people to help figure out what makes us healthy and happy. The Harvard study shows that being connected to other people matters more than any other life factor (including money and power) to our health and happiness.¹ Many other studies also show that relationships matter to our well-being. In fact, having strong relationships affects our body in the following ways:

- Decreasing blood pressure and cholesterol²
- Keeping the heart rate low³
- Lowering levels of the stress hormone, cortisol⁴
- Increasing immune cells to fight infections⁵
- Lowering inflammation⁶

Also, relationships lower rates of anxiety and depression while bringing up our self-esteem.⁷ People connected to others are also less likely to get as many colds,⁸ have fewer heart attacks,⁹ and live longer.¹⁰ Research suggests, too, that if you feel closer to your family and friends, you find deeper meaning and purpose in your life.¹¹ These connections also help us trust others more and work better with them.⁷

Functional MRI brain scans show that when we see other people going through good or bad experiences, we also feel their emotions.¹² And when we see another person being touched, the touch center of our brain turns on, almost like we were touched too.¹³ The cells that control this process in our brains are called “mirror neurons,” and more and more studies are showing that they play a big role in how relationships affect us.¹⁴

What types of relationships matter the most to my health?

Scientists have looked at relationships with family, friends, and coworkers, and it turns out that all of these connections affect our health. Warmer relationships with our parents during childhood result in better overall health later in life.¹⁵ Similarly, when we feel supported by our partners, we feel less stressed while dealing with a difficult situation.¹⁶ And the friends we surround ourselves with can improve the health of our body and mind too.¹⁷

All of these relationships affect our well-being, so it is important to surround ourselves with people we care about. The quality of our relationships with these people matters much more than how many relationships we have. In other words, it may be better to have a few people we

are really close to and can share the details about our lives with—confidants—rather than a lot of people we only know fairly well.¹⁸ Part of why having confidants is so important is because when we support other people, we are more likely to gain their support in the future.¹⁹ People have each other's backs. This is called social capital, and we build social capital by making strong connections to our communities and feeling a sense of belonging.²⁰

How does technology affect our relationships?

For a long time, we were worried that cell phones, Internet use, and social media would make people feel less connected to others. But, there are some studies that show people who use technology are just as likely to connect to the people around them.²¹ It is possible to use technology to connect with other people from all over the world.

How can I connect with more people around me?

The following are some ways you can connect more:

- Volunteer. Research has shown that this is a great way to meet someone and can also improve your health.²²
- Talk to a social worker at your healthcare clinic to find local services in your community.
- Find online and community-based support groups to connect with people who have the same medical concerns.
- Join a religious or spiritual community.
- Consider adopting a pet. Bonding with a pet may increase your trust in others and inspire you to be closer to other humans too.
- Attend a local sporting event or art performance.
- Help organize community events by joining a steering committee or board.
- Attend important community events like civic celebrations or fundraisers.
- Take a course of some kind, or join a hobby or interest group.

What are some things that I can do to form stronger relationships with the people I meet?

While every relationship is different, studies show that we can better connect with the people around us if we do the following:

- Stay positive. Being positive decreases the number of disagreements between people.²³
- Share new experiences together. This helps relationships last longer.²⁴
- Be there for others when they need you. Research shows that helping others makes us even happier than when they help us.²⁵
- Be around. Being present for the people around you is the biggest factor in forming friendships.²⁶
- Support how other people see themselves, and be flexible when who they are changes over time. Make others feel good about what they are doing in their lives.²⁷
- Make time for the people you form relationships with. The more time you put in, the longer the connection will last.²⁸

- Practice mindful awareness. For more information, the handouts “[An Introduction to Mindful Awareness](#)” and “[Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living](#).”

Exercise: Figuring Out How Socially Connected You Are²⁹

This simple exercise takes just 5 minutes. Grab a pen and a piece of paper and answer the following 6 questions:

1. Who gives you help when you need it?
2. Who helps you feel more relaxed when you are under pressure or feeling tense?
3. Who accepts you totally, including all your worst and your best points?
4. Who cares about you, no matter what is happening to you?
5. Who helps you feel better when you are feeling down in the dumps?
6. Who helps you feel better when you feel really upset?

Think about your answers to these questions. If you are having trouble coming up with names, it might be worth talking to someone on your health care team. If you have people listed and you have not spoken to them in a while, it might be a good idea to connect. You might also consider reaching out to someone who could use your help.

Taking steps to form stronger relationships can be a hard process, but you may find yourself coming out of this process feeling happier and more connected to the people you care about.

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe...Our task must be to...embrace all living creatures and the whole of Nature in its beauty.

- Albert Einstein

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 Family, Friends and Co-Workers	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
Harvard University	TED talk on the 75-year Harvard Health Study	https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness/transcript

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Carlin Flora	<u>Book: Friendfluence: The Surprising Ways Friends Make Us Who We Are</u>	https://www.carlinflora.com/

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

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