

How to Build a Life of Close Connections

Studies have shown that loneliness and social isolation 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, neighbours, and mentors like that teacher, coach, or manager who made 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 by 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 helps 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 (like saying, “I love you”) with close family, 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. The keys to durability were a commitment to the relationship and good communication.

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