

Friends Are Good for Your Health

Everybody needs friends, but not everybody knows how to make friends and keep them. Demands from job and family can leave many people with little energy for bringing new people into their lives or for nurturing the relationships they already have. But friends are important to your health.

"Research has shown that people who do not have strong support from friends and family live shorter lives and suffer more from stress," says Cheryl A. Richey, Ph.D., professor of social work at the University of Washington. "Support from friends can give people the strength to make positive changes in their lives, such as staying away from drugs or leaving an abusive relationship."



Some people may find it difficult to make friends because they lack the skills needed to interact effectively with other people and build supportive social contacts. People are not born with these skills; they need to learn them.

Where Do You Begin?

"Rather than setting a broad goal like 'making new friends,' break that goal down into small steps you can tackle," Dr. Richey suggests.

The first step may be to vow to start one conversation each day with someone you don't know well, such as the new person at your office or a visitor to your church. It may help to rehearse ahead of time, by figuring out a topic and opening line, and even practicing with a supportive family member or trusted friend.

For some, meeting new people may be the easy part. The difficulty is knowing how to advance from being acquaintances to becoming friends. Disclosing information about yourself is one way to build trust in a friendship. Another is reciprocating—for example, by listening carefully when others disclose information about themselves, or more concretely, by trading babysitting for other favors.

Cultivate Friendships

Some people find themselves without support, not because they can't initiate social contacts, but because they've burned out their friends by asking for help too often and not returning it, or by violating trust such as telling others a secret shared in confidence.

To reconnect with a strained social network, Dr. Richey recommends initiating contacts during times when you are not in need of support. This can begin with a simple, problem-free conversation.

"To rebuild relationships, it's important to become more reliable, responsible, and reciprocal in your daily associations," Dr. Richey says.

Even if your social network is supportive, having too many people around all the time may interfere with private time for you and your family. Part of social skill-building is setting limits in a relationship or keeping a relationship on an acquaintance level rather than pursuing close friendship.

And, in the end, the number of social relationships isn't nearly as important as their quality. A person with a huge social network could be worse off than a loner if most of those social contacts are draining and negative.

"It's more than just a body count," Dr. Richey said. "Look at the kinds of exchanges you have with the people in your network, and whether these people can provide the kind of assistance or support that will be helpful."

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