

Social support: Tap this tool to combat stress

Having close friends and family on whom you can count has far-reaching benefits for your health. Here's how to build and maintain these essential relationships.

It probably doesn't take a scientific study to convince you that surrounding yourself with people who genuinely care about you can have a positive effect on your mental well-being, but there's plenty of research to confirm it.

A strong social support network can be critical to help you through the stress of tough times, whether you've had a bad day at work or a year filled with loss or chronic illness. Since your supportive family, friends, and co-workers are such an important part of your life, it's never too soon to cultivate these important relationships.

What is a social support network?

A social support network is made up of friends, family and peers. A social support network is different from a support group, which is generally a structured meeting run by a mental health professional. Although both can play an important role in times of stress, a social support network is something you can develop when you're not under stress, providing the comfort of knowing that your friends are there for you if you need them.

You don't need to formalize your support network with regular meetings or an official leader. A coffee break with a friend at work, a quick chat with a neighbor, a phone call to your sister, even a visit to church are all ways to develop and foster lasting relationships with the people close to you. Don't wait for someone else to make the first move. If you meet someone you think might become a good friend, invite him or her to join you for coffee or another casual activity.

Benefits of a social support network

Numerous studies have demonstrated that having a network of supportive relationships contributes to psychological well-being. When you have a social support network, you benefit in the following ways:

- **Sense of belonging.** Spending time with people helps ward off loneliness. Whether it's other new moms, dog lovers, fishing buddies or siblings, just knowing you're not alone can go a long way toward coping with stress.
- **Increased sense of self-worth.** Having people who call you a friend reinforces the idea that you're a good person to be around.
- **Feeling of security.** Your social network gives you access to information, advice, guidance and other types of assistance should you need them. It's comforting to know that you have people you can turn to in time of need.

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Cultivating your social support network

If you want to improve your mental health and your ability to combat stress, surround yourself with at least a few good friends and confidants. Here are some ideas for building your social network:

- **Volunteer.** Pick a cause that's important to you and get involved. You're sure to meet others who share similar interests and values.
- **Join a gym.** Or check out the local community center. Start a walking group at work or at your church. You'll make friends and get some exercise.
- **Go back to school.** A local college or community education course puts you in contact with others who share similar hobbies or pursuits.
- **Look online.** The newest generation of social networking sites can help you stay connected with friends and family. Many good sites exist for people going through stressful times, such as chronic illness, loss of a loved one, new baby, divorce and other life changes. Be sure to stick to reputable sites, and be cautious about arranging in-person meetings.

Give and take: The foundation of social networks

A successful relationship is a two-way street. The better a friend you are, the better your friends will be. Here are some suggestions for nurturing your relationships:

- **Stay in touch.** Answering phone calls, returning emails and reciprocating invitations let people know you care.
- **Don't compete.** Be happy instead of jealous when your friends succeed, and they'll celebrate your accomplishments in return.
- **Be a good listener.** Find out what's important to your friends—you might find you have even more in common than you think.
- **Don't overdo it.** In your zeal to extend your social network, be careful not to overwhelm friends and family with phone calls and emails. Save those high-demand times for when you really need them.
- **Appreciate your friends and family.** Take time to say thank you and express how important they are to you. Be there for them when they need support.

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The bottom line

Remember that the goal of building your social support network is to reduce your stress level, not add to it. Watch for situations that seem to drain your energy. For example, avoid spending too much time with someone who is constantly negative and critical. Similarly, steer clear of people involved in unhealthy behaviors, such as alcohol or substance abuse, especially if you've struggled with these addictions.

Taking the time to build a social support network is a wise investment not only in your mental well-being but also in your physical health and longevity. Research shows that those who enjoy high levels of social support stay healthier and live longer. So don't wait.

Start making more friends or improving the relationships you already have. Whether you're the one getting the support or the one doling out the encouragement, you'll reap a plethora of rewards.

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