

MENTAL HEALTH

SOCIAL NETWORKS: GETTING AND STAYING CONNECTED

Having a healthy life takes a village!

Building and maintaining a strong support network can be one of the best preventative self-care strategies you can put in place for your mental health and wellness. When considering who to include, be sure to not choose those who may pass judgement or cause you additional anxiety or stress. Sometimes we naturally want to seek support from our family members, but if you have a narcissistic mother, or a critical brother, family may not be your best option!



A good support system can be drawn from helpful and positive people in your life like family members, friends, coworkers, and neighbours; anyone who fills your bucket and makes you comfortable just being YOU. Unsure who you have in your life that fits the bill? You might want to consider planting some seeds and widening your circle by getting involved in your community.

Try volunteering, taking a new class, or participating in a recreational sport. You can also explore the digital world of social networking. Online, you can find support groups, interest groups, educational materials and forums, group chats, etc - but remember that socializing in this way is best when balanced with face-to-face interactions. Also, self-comparing to the perceived “gold standard” of life is linked with lowered self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy and jealousy. For example, if using Facebook to participate in a support group for divorce sounds helpful, you could also come across a picture of your sibling’s perfect relationship with their spouse in your news feed which could make you feel worse. Tread those waters lightly and try to reach for a real life experience as often as possible.

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Having a social network is important.

Here is what studies have revealed:

1. Lack of social connection is a greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure.
2. A person's level of happiness is related to the happiness of their social networks. If a person has a happy friend who lives within a mile, the person is 25% more likely to be happy as well. In addition, a person's happiness can be related to the happiness of someone separated by up to three degrees (a friend of a friend of a friend).

Benefits of a social network:

- **Accountability.** Being accountable to someone can help with success in any lifestyle change. When you set a goal, and share that goal with people within your support system, you are more likely to achieve it.
- **Improved physical and emotional health.** Dealing with intense emotions can have physical and psychological effects. Your social network can help you navigate the power of emotions, provide regular check-ins, and encourage you to take breaks when perhaps you can't quite see what you need.
- **Better problem-solving.** No matter what situation you might be dealing with, you aren't the only one who has ever experienced it. Members of your social network can be valuable when deciding on what direction to take. Having someone to help you talk through a conflict or crisis can be invaluable to sort through creative strategies and make sure you are making a good decision for your next step. Even simply knowing others have gone through a similar situation can relieve some of the stress.
- **Sense of belonging.** Humans are designed with a basic need for a sense of community or belonging. Feeling accepted by others gives meaning and value to life. If you are supported through a difficult time, you are more likely to give back to others within your social network who find themselves in a similar position.
- **Giving Back.** Finding opportunities to help others is a huge help in elevating our sense of self and improving well-being. When you find ways to be of service to other people it gives a reprieve from your own problems and increases your feelings of strength, reduces anxiety and generally elevates your mood.

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While it's important to create a social network, it is also important to be a valued member in someone else's social network. Make a list of people you would like to stay in touch with and try to reach out and make one emotional connection a day. You want to foster a relationship where you can communicate openly and honestly about your concerns, problems, trials, and triumphs. Sometimes during times of high stress we remember to talk but can forget to listen. Social networking will help to build your communication skills, help with problem solving, build empathy, and perhaps even give a fresh perspective on something you may be dealing with.

If you feel overwhelmed and are having difficulty coping and have not yet built your own social network, connect with a professional. This may be a psychologist, social worker, pastor, life coach, family doctor or other mental health professional. Take the first step to feeling better and take baby steps to create a plan for social connection.



Sources:

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