

YOU'VE GOT A *friend* IN ME

WHETHER YOU ARE FACING A PERSONAL CRISIS OR YOU JUST WANT TO SPEND TIME WITH PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT YOU, RELATIONSHIPS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN YOUR DAY-TO-DAY LIFE.

By Kendra Cherry | [VeryWellMind.com](https://www.verywellmind.com)

Psychologists and other mental health professionals often talk about the importance of having a strong social support network. When trying to reach our goals or deal with a crisis, experts frequently implore people to lean on their friends and family for support. Research has also demonstrated the link between social relationships and many different aspects of health and wellness.

Poor social support has been linked to depression, and loneliness has been shown to increase the risk of depression, suicide, alcohol use, cardiovascular disease, and altered brain function. In one study of middle-aged men over a seven-year

period, those with strong social and emotional support were less likely to die than those who lacked such relationships.

Social support builds people up during times of stress and often gives them the strength to carry on and even thrive. But social support is certainly not a one-way street. In addition to relying on others, you also serve as a form of support for many people in your life.

Supportive social networks can come in different forms and play different roles in your life.

Sometimes the people in your life provide **emotional support**. They back you up when you need it and

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COUNSELOR COLUMN

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Q: It's harder for me to make friends as an adult. What can I do?

A: This is a common concern that affects many adults today. Many of our past friendships were based on convenience. Take school, for example. We see the same peers at the same time and place, so maintaining a friendship is relatively easy. However, when the connecting factor – school – is taken away, the friendship fades.

I recommend that my clients analyze what values they are looking for in a friend, so the relationship has a greater chance to last long-term. Once you've determined what you value in someone (respect, kindness, etc.), you can start building your friend group.

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are there with a shoulder to cry on when things don't go your way. This type of support can be particularly important during times of stress or when people are feeling lonely.

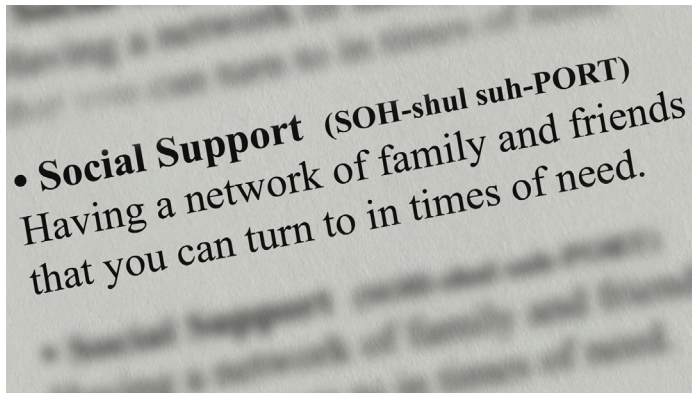
In other cases, the people in your social network might provide **instrumental support**. They take care of your physical needs and offer a helping hand when you need it. This might involve bringing you a hot meal when you are sick or giving you a ride when your car is in the shop.

People can also provide what is known as **informational support**. This can involve providing guidance, advice, information, and mentoring. Such support can be important when making decisions or big changes in one's life. By having this form of support, people may feel less anxious and stressed out about the problems they are trying to solve.

HOW SOCIAL SUPPORT BENEFITS OUR HEALTH

Just a few of the possible benefits of social connectedness include:

- **Encourages Healthy Choices and Behaviors:** Participation in social groups has a normative influence on behaviors, often influencing whether people eat a healthy diet, exercise, smoke, drink, or use illegal substances. Clearly, social groups can sometimes have a negative influence in this regard when peer pressure and influence leads to poor or even dangerous health choices. However, group pressure and support can also lead people to engage in healthy behaviors as well.
- **Helps Cope with Stress:** Social support also helps people to cope with stress. Stress has been shown to have serious health consequences ranging from



reduced immunity to increased risk of heart disease. Being surrounded by people who are caring and supportive helps people to see themselves as better capable of dealing with the stresses that life brings. Research has also shown that having strong social support in times of crisis can help reduce the consequences of trauma-induced disorders including PTSD.

- **Improves Motivation:** Social relationships can also help people to stay motivated when trying to achieve their goals. People who are trying to lose weight or quit smoking often find that it helps to connect with people who are actively trying to attain those same goals. Talking to people who are going through the same experience can often be a source of support, empathy, and motivation.

Every once in a while, it can be important to assess your relationships. Do you have enough social support? Would you benefit from deepening your current relationships? Could you use some new social contacts or social outlets?

You might decide to get more proactive about giving and getting emotional support. It could greatly improve the quality of your life.

And if you're struggling to make friends or keep them, you might reach out to a therapist. A mental health provider may be able to assist you in managing your relationships in a healthy way so you can have the social support you need to be your best.

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Here are some examples of where to explore finding friends:

Attend a support group. A support group is a group of people that share and connect on a similar experience. Support groups provide comfort and encouragement. This can be a great way to engage in self-care while branching out and meeting other people.

Use social media to your advantage. Let's face it, social media has gotten a bad rap for wasting our time and as a platform for unhealthy comparisons. However, social media offers a lot of potential as a place to make new friends. Reach out to someone to see how they are doing and if they would like to connect at some point. Please be open to connecting virtually.

Reconnect with old friends. Think about someone to whom you once felt connected and now miss. Send a message to check in with them. I recommend that if you agree to meet in person (or virtually), set a specific day and time for when this will happen.

Connect with co-workers. Getting to know co-workers during and outside of work is a wonderful way to build a work family. As long as we are appropriate and respectful, getting to know our co-workers can help us feel connected at our place of employment. We may even find a deeper level of motivation to go to work.

Join a gym. Gyms provide a wonderful opportunity for people to form friendships. One of these ways can be through a group fitness class. Introduce yourself to a member or to the group fitness instructor. Getting to know other gym members through fitness is great for your mental and physical health.

One last tip I would like to leave you is to build your self-confidence. When we have a better connection to our inner self, we will be better equipped to connect with others.

If you would like to schedule a one-on-one session with an EAP counselor for further guidance in making connections, please call The Village Family Service Center at 1-800-627-8220.

WORRIED ABOUT DEBT?

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