**HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS AND HOW TO MAINTAIN THEM**

During this busy time, remember that supportive relationships are an important part of our mental health.

Just as your physical health needs ongoing care, your mental health also requires regular attention. When we nurture our mental health, we handle stress more effectively, recover from setbacks more quickly, sleep better, and physically heal more quickly. In many ways, mental health is the key to a healthier, happier existence.

**Social Relationships Improve Your Health**

People with strong, supportive relationships live healthier, longer lives. People with healthy relationships:

* Heal more quickly
* Have lower blood pressure
* Are less likely to experience a depression relapse
* Are less anxious

**Social relationships nurture mental health in several ways**:

1. Relationships help provide people with purpose and meaning.
2. Your friends and family might encourage positive health behaviors (like following a healthy diet, finding work-life balance, and making regular doctor’s appointments).
3. Conversations with a good, empathetic listener can help relieve stress and help you process your emotions.
4. Engaging in activities with friends (such as walking or playing sports) increases your energy and releases tension.

While screen time and phone calls are easy ways to interact with our friends and family, nothing compares to face-to-face interaction. In fact, studies suggest that excessive social media use might trigger depressive symptoms due to feelings of inadequacy or jealousy.

**Identifying and Fostering Healthy Relationships**

Unhealthy relationships can quickly become a stressor or mental illness trigger. For this reason, it’s important to pursue relationships with people who encourage healthy habits and provide emotional support.

Depending on your circumstances, consider:

1. Reaching out to old friends you have lost contact with
2. Making regular plans with family members
3. Attending a family or school reunion
4. Joining a social organization that reflects your interests or values
5. Volunteering with a non-profit organization you support

And don’t limit your peer group to your family and existing friends. You might find meaningful relationships and emotional support from close work colleagues, clergy members, neighbors, and others in your community.

**8 Keys to Healthy Relationships**

1) Honesty

“I feel the key to any and all healthy relationships is telling the truth, or at least not lying,” says Certified Life Coach Caleb Backe. “Why is this fundamental? Because telling the truth comes at a price sometimes. There is always some kind of responsibility tethered to the truth and to speaking it. But it is precisely that price, that cost, and that responsibility which serves to strengthen relationships, to build trust, and to forge alliances of honesty between people.”

2) Self-awareness

“I think self-awareness is key. Understanding your own needs and learning to accept what is vulnerable can be the foundation for genuine communication, empathy, and connection,” says Licensed Clinical Psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Aram. “One of the most harmful factors in our relationship with others (and ourselves) is our inner critical voice that judges events through past wounds. By understanding these raw spots and practicing self-compassion, we can better relate to others and advocate for what we need in relationships.”

3) Understanding

“Healthy relationships involve a connection that is all about fully understanding each other,” explains Certified Executive Coach Kathy Taberner. “We can ensure we understand each other by staying open and curious with others. When we are stuck in our own perspective, we tell, judge, blame, and shame others because we believe our way is the only way. When we can shift this to being open and non-judging with others, we can begin to understand what they are saying and can dig deep to truly understand them.”

4) Empathy

“One of the most important components to maintaining a healthy relationship is cultivating empathy,” says Licensed Mental Health Therapist Erin Swinson. “Communicating empathy is a skill that breeds connection with others and gives loved ones a chance to feel felt and understood without judgment or criticism. Empathy also allows for emotional vulnerability in relationships and a safe space for others to express themselves openly and with positive regard, which helps strengthen and maintain healthy relationships.”

5) Support

Therapist Kimberly Hershenson says that every healthy relationship requires certain qualities to ensure it will last, one being support: “Asking someone how they are doing sometimes without even sharing your own personal issues allows you to be completely available to them. Listening to others’ problems and lending an ear is a good way to get out of your head and let someone know you are fully present to listen to them,” she explains.

6) Time

“The biggest key is to put in time. Whether the relationship is between you and a relative, you and a friend, or you and a significant other, nothing can grow and thrive if you ignore it or assume the person will always wait for you to have time for them later,” explains relationship expert and dual licensed mental health professional Kryss Shane. “Make a point to reach out regularly. Thanks to social media and text messaging, some relationships can go a month between phone chats or visits as long as there is connection elsewhere, whether through commenting on each other’s online posts or texting short thoughts with each other.”

7) Open-mindedness

“Having an open mind, you acknowledge you don’t know everything and nothing’s ever black and white. You continue to learn and evolve with your relationships,” says Psychotherapist Dena W. Alalfey. This additionally opens the door to resolving conflict and better understanding one another: “When conflict arises in healthy relationships, both people are able to listen intently to each other as they express the way they feel while acknowledging the other’s feelings and they’re able to apologize,” she explains.

8) Shared experiences

“The more we consciously engage in an activity, be it playing board games, hiking, eating a meal together, or just laughing together, the more oxytocin gets released in our body,” explains Meditation Coach Nidhi Idnani. “This feel-good hormone makes us not only feel good about ourselves, but by extension, also the people with whom we shared the experience or activity, thereby strengthening that bond.”