

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Relationships: Friends Keep You Healthy

Most people know that proper nutrition, exercise, and regular check-ups promote good health, but did you know that friendship is just as important? Statistics show that people who enjoy healthy relationships suffer fewer incidences of cancer, stroke, heart disease, and circulatory disorders. They also live longer.

There are skills and strategies that will improve the quality of your relationships, just as proper exercise and balanced nutrition improve the quality of your physical health.

You Feel the Way You Look

The way we feel shows on our face and in our body language. When we are happy, we smile and walk tall. When we are sad, we frown and drag ourselves through the day. Research has revealed that it also works in reverse. Smiling and laughing sets off actual physical processes that make us feel good. And positive body language tends to produce a positive attitude. In short, we often feel what we express on our face and in our posture.

If you find yourself in a conflict or are undergoing a stressful event such as a job interview, remember that a smiling face and positive body language go a long way towards making a success of a difficult situation. Not only will a smile help to win over other people, but it will make you feel better about yourself, too.

Reframe Your Perspective

Perspective is a powerful thing. Events only have meaning in the frame of reference in which we perceive them. In other words, if we look at the same situation from a different point of view, it may change the way we all react to it.

Think of an event in your past that seemed like a mistake or disappointment at the time, but actually resulted in a success. Maybe it was a job you wanted, but didn't get—and then you got a better one. Many things that seem to be undesirable can actually be interpreted as advantages in a different context.

Your Support Network

The people you are close to make up your social support network. Different people in your network satisfy different needs in one of four categories:

1. Advice or information
2. Material help
3. Emotional support
4. Companionship

Building and maintaining a social support network requires that you understand your own values. Members of a positive support group should share, or at least not contradict, those values.

When a member of your group does something you consider wrong, ask yourself: "Is what my friend did truly wrong—a violation of both his or her values and mine—or just different from the way I would have handled it?"

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Friends don't have to hold beliefs identical to yours; people often "agree to disagree" or compromise. But positive, nurturing groups have norms that promote and support:

- Caring
- Communication, and
- Stress management

A caring group shows concern for someone when he or she is upset. A group with strong communication norms will let its members know how much they are appreciated. And a group with good stress-management norms, sets priorities, focuses their efforts, and handles stress in a relaxed and constructive way.

Building a Support Network

Perhaps you're new in town or have just started a new job and do not have a support network. How do you "reach out?" Here are some suggestions:

- **Give the gift of time and attention.** Everyone appreciates a friendly ear.
- **Plan special meals.** Invite neighbors or co-workers who live alone.
- **Get a pet.** Walking a pet is a great way to get out in the neighborhood and meet people.
- **Join a club or group.** Become connected with individuals with common interests.
- **Become a volunteer for an organization in need.** You'll meet new people with shared interests, and contribute a valuable service to society.

The family is the original support group, yet often we fail to communicate effectively with our loved ones. Maintain the family support network with these tips:

Be a Good Friend

Being a good friend is important both within the family and outside the home. If you treat someone well, you're more likely to be treated well in return. Here are eight simple guidelines a good friend should observe:

Once You’re Well on Your Way

Like anything else, establishing healthy relationships requires work. It also calls for decided action. Even with the best of intentions, it's sometimes tempting just to let things run their course. The key to successful relationships lies in taking charge. Because we value healthy relationships, we may need, at times, to ask for help to repair and improve a troubled relationship.

- **Be there.** Spend time with your family.
- **Make time.** Set aside a special period each day to relax and talk.
- **Show interest.** Listen and give support to what your kids and spouse tell you.
- **Reserve judgment.** As long as they're not hurting themselves, perhaps you don't have to approve of your kids' music, fashions or hairstyles.
- **Do things together.** Share common interests, both working and playing.
- **Show respect.** All family members are individuals with their own views and tastes.

1. **Keep your word, even about things that seem unimportant.** What is trivial to you may mean a lot to someone else.
2. **Allow others to shine.** When it's someone else's turn in the spotlight, stand up and cheer, but don't butt in.
3. **Really listen when your friends speak.** Try to give them what they need, whether it’s advice, help or comfort (and listen to them, when the roles are reversed and you have requested their help).
4. **Be honest, but show tact.** Offer criticism only when asked.
5. **Let others have the last word.** Maybe you can top their story, but save it for another time.
6. **Limit gripes and gossip** to five minutes or less per session and always try to end on an upbeat note.
7. **Don't make jokes at the expense of others**—even if they aren't part of your group.
8. **Don't keep score about who owes whom the most favors.** A good friend enjoys helping just for the sake of being helpful.