

Positive Social Connections



Overview

Having positive social relationships provides a sense of self-worth and meaning. Humans are by nature social creatures, and the quality (not quantity) of connections is essential to health and well-being. Conversely, individuals who perceive that they are neglected or shunned by others often report higher levels of depression and anxiety, lack self-confidence, and may experience long-term health issues.

As one gets older, maintaining social connections can become harder and take more effort. However, even one connection can protect against a number of negative outcomes.

Beyond suggestions in the video, the following are strategies to help you foster positive social relationships.

Insight into the "Why Not?"

There are numerous opportunities to connect with others occur throughout the day, but they are often ignored or avoided for a variety of reasons (e.g., perhaps you may not have had time, or you had concerns of being rejected, or you had a preconceived notions about the other person, etc.). Take time to reflect on these instances, which may highlight hidden biases or concerns.

Here are some questions to consider:

- Were there times when you had a chance to connect with someone new but didn't? Why do you think you couldn't?
- Think about someone who is outside of your friendship group who you would like to get to know but don't? What stops you from doing so?
- Can you think of a time when you had a mistaken impression about a peer? That is, you thought they were one thing but ended up being quite different. What was your mistaken impression? What did you learn about this experience?
- Can you think of a time when you were misunderstood by a friend? What about from someone who didn't know you very well? How did that affect your relationship with that person?

Create New Social Goals

From this insight, list at least three measurable goals with respect to making new social connections. These goals should be attainable over time, measurable, and realistic (e.g., "making 100 new friends by the end of the year" would not be a reasonable nor attainable goal). Only one of these goals should pertain to social media interactions (the rest should pertain to in-person interactions). Examples of goals could be:

- To form an ongoing relationship with a new peer (one who you have yet to meet)
- To learn 5 new things about 3 peers that you know
- To have lunch with at least one new peer

Be aware of the answers you provided in the "Why Not?" exercise. Awareness is often the first step towards overcoming your hesitancy to initiate a connection. Should you find yourself hesitating in the face of a making a new connection, try to reframe your perspective by asking yourself "what is the worst that can happen by at least saying hello?", or pretend that you are an actor in a movie or play and the scene calls for you to initiate the conversation. Whatever your strategy, stick

with it and always reward yourself for following through. Periodically review your progress towards your social goals over the set time frame.

Practice Random Acts of Kindness

Social connections can be made in seconds through the simple act of helping others (see the Kindness Boomerang (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwAYpLVyEFG&list=PLvzQwE5IWqhQWsPsW5PQQ5qj50BewwqUw&index=4>)). In

addition, create “Daily Do Good” moments: before doing anything first thing in the morning, consider 1-2 actions that you will perform during that day-- all in the spirit of doing something for others. The action itself can be quite simple or more involved (volunteering in a tutoring program). The key is to place the needs of the targeted person ahead of yourself.

Join Something, but Not Anything

Obviously, the way to make social connections is to seek social opportunities. In keeping with the *Create New Social Goals* exercise, participate in at least social activity in the next month. Make sure that the activity you choose is meaningful for you and is something that you find interesting. As some examples:

- **Attend community events.** Look for groups or clubs that gather around an interest or hobby you share. These groups are often listed in the newspaper or on community bulletin boards. There are also many websites that help you connect with like-minded individuals in your neighborhood or city.
- **Volunteer.** Offer your time or talents at a hospital, place of worship, museum, community center, charitable group or other organization. You can form strong connections when you work with people who have mutual interests.
- **Extend and accept invitations.** Invite a colleague to join you for coffee or lunch. When you're invited to a social gathering, say yes. Contact someone who recently invited you to an activity and return the favor.
- **Take up a new interest.** Take a college or community education course to meet people who have similar interests. Join a class at a local gym, senior center or community fitness facility.
- **Join a faith community.** Take advantage of special activities and get-to-know-you events for new members.

Links

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/friendships/art-20044860>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm>

<https://www.nih.gov/health-information/social-wellness-toolkit>

Books

Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler (2009). Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives -- How Your Friends' Friends' Friends Affect Everything You Feel, Think, and Do

Matthew Lieberman (2013). Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect.

Lane Moore (2018). How to Be Alone: If You Want To, and Even If You Don't

William Least Heat Moon (1999). Blue Highways: A Journey into America

Anne Lamott (2012). Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers