



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

RELATIONSHIPS - FRIENDS KEEP YOU HEALTHY!

Most people are aware 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.

"I get along with most people," you say. "But if someone doesn't like me, what can I do about it? I'm the way I am. I can't change that."

Well, there are skills and strategies you can use 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

All of us are aware that 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.

Lately, some fascinating research has revealed that it also works in reverse. According to Paul Ekman, a professor of psychology at the University of California, smiling and laughing sets off actual physical processes that make us feel good. And positive body language tends to produce a positive attitude. Professor Ekman concludes that we often feel what we express on our face and in our posture.

Next time you're feeling low, try this: Sit up straight. Throw back your shoulders. Breathe deeply. Smile.

You'll notice a rapid improvement in your state of mind. Why? Because your brain is getting a message from your body saying, "I feel great."

If you find yourself in conflict with a family member or co-worker, or if you are undergoing a stressful encounter 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 the other person, but it will make you feel better about yourself, too.

REFRAME YOUR PERSPECTIVE

One thing to keep in mind when evaluating or interpreting situations

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

For example, think of some event in your past that seemed like a mistake or disappointment at the time, but actually resulted in a success for you. 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 what scientists call your "social support network." Different people in your network satisfy different needs. Usually their contributions fall into one of four categories:

- ▲ Advice or information
- ▲ Material help
- ▲ Emotional support
- ▲ Companionship

Building and maintaining a social support network requires that you understand your own values - what's important in your life. 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?"

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

- ▲ Caring
- ▲ Communication
- ▲ Stress management

Group norms are the set of rules, written or unwritten, governing the behaviour of the members. 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 neighbours or co-workers who live alone.
- ▲ Get a pet. Walking a pet is a great way to get out into the neighbourhood and meet people.
- ▲ Join a club or activity group that interests you to become connected with a group of individuals with common interests.
- ▲ Become a volunteer for an organization in need.

The family is the original support group, yet often we fail to communicate effectively with our loved ones. Here are a few tips:

- ▲ 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.

BE A GOOD FRIEND

Being a good friend is important both within the family circle 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:

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

GIVING FEEDBACK

Giving a friend feedback can sometimes be the hardest thing to do.

Often people will choose not to say what's on their mind for fear of hurting or angering their friend. Being able to give feedback is a skill that can be learned and practiced. This skill will improve your relationships.

Let your friend know how their actions are making you feel rather than criticizing their actions. For example, "Fred, when you arrive late for our lunch dates, I feel very frustrated, and I imagine you do not respect the fact that I am busy and have a tight schedule."

Although this information may be difficult to receive, it is much less difficult than being criticized for being an irresponsible or disrespectful person and so on...and so on.

Being personally attacked closes off communication. Hopefully, by taking ownership of how we are feeling, communication will remain open and some problem solving can be done. As the above example points to Fred's lateness problem, perhaps a difference could be made, simply by changing the meeting time.

Even if our friend does not act on the information, at least we can feel better, having got these feelings out in the open.

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 to such a high degree, we may feel at times, a necessity to ask for help to repair and improve a troubled relationship. Perhaps your concern is your difficulty in establishing or maintaining relationships. Do you see a long-term friendship strained or threatened, because you are cannot come to an agreement on important issues?

If this may sound like any difficulties you are having, or if there is an aspect of a relationship you would like to work on, an EAP is here to help you suggest ways to improve your relationship skills and work out any problems.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

English Service: 1-800-387-4765
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