

Making and Keeping Friends—A Self-Help Guide

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Foreword

This booklet contains information, ideas, and strategies that people from all over the country have found to be helpful in relieving and preventing troubling feelings and symptoms. The information in this booklet can be used safely along with your other health care treatment.

You may want to read through this booklet at least once before you begin working on developing your own action plans for prevention and recovery. This can help enhance your understanding of the entire process. Then you can go back to work on each section. You may want to do this slowly, working on a portion of it and then putting it aside and revise it on a regular basis as you learn new things about yourself and ways you can help yourself to feel better.

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Introduction

People seem to have a natural need for friends and with good reason. Friends increase your enjoyment of life and relieve feelings of loneliness. They even can help reduce stress and improve your health. Having good friends is especially helpful when you are going through any kind of hard time: experiencing anxiety or panic attacks, depression, phobias or delusional thinking; living with a serious illness or disability; having major surgery; having a loss in your life; or just being under a lot of stress. At times like these, good friends and supporters can make all the difference.

When you are with good friends you feel good about yourself, and you are glad to be with them. A friend is someone who —

- you like, respect, and trust, and who likes, respects and trusts you
- doesn't always understand you, but accepts and likes you as you are, even as you grow and change
- allows you the space to change, grow, make decisions, and even make mistakes
- listens to you and share with you, both the good times and the bad times
- respects your need for confidentiality so you can tell them anything
- lets you freely express your feelings and emotions without judging, teasing, or criticizing
- gives you good advice when you want and ask for it, assists you in taking action that will help you feel better, and works with you in difficult situations to figure out what to do next
- accepts your self-defined limitations and helps you to remove them
- lets you help them when they need it
- you want to be with, but you aren't obsessed about being with
- doesn't ever take advantage of you

A man in a focus group said, “Friendship is a continuing source of bonding, releasing, and creating in yourself and with the other person. There is an emotional bond.”

A good friend or supporter may or may not be your age or the same sex as you; come from the same educational, cultural, or religious background; or share interests that are similar to yours. Friendships also have different depths; some are closer to the heart, some more superficial-but they’re all useful and good.

Activity: List qualities you would like your friends, or some of your friends, to have.

Making Friends

Making new friends can be exciting or intimidating, depending on your personality and your circumstances, but ultimately it is rewarding. To meet new people who might become your friends, you have to go to places where others are gathered. The hardest thing about going out and doing anything in the community is doing it for the first time. It’s hard for everyone. Push through those hard feelings and go. Most of the time, you will be glad you did.

Don’t limit yourself to one idea or strategy for meeting people. The broader your effort, the greater your likelihood of success. Try several of these ideas:

- Attend a support group. Support groups are a great way to make new friends. It could be a group for people who have similar health issues or life challenges, or a group for people of the same age or sex.
- Go to community activities like sporting events, theatrical productions, concerts, art shows, poetry readings, book signings, civic groups, special interest groups, and political meetings. Take a course or join a church. Let yourself be seen and known in the community. If money is a problem, consider going to your local library and looking in the newspaper for listings of free events. Spend time in places that are free, like a local bookstore with couches where you can sit and read for a while. You will have a feeling of connection even without any dialogue with others.
- Volunteer. Strong connections often are formed when people work together on projects of mutual concern. When volunteering, you are already with a group of people with a common interest. You could help out at a soup kitchen, read to children in day care, visit people in nursing homes, deliver flowers in the hospital, or serve on a political or social action committee. You could bring snacks for the other volunteers and arrange a time to get together and eat with them for more social contact.

Activity: Think about places where you have made friends in the past. Check your newspaper for community events and support groups. Which ones sound appealing to you? Make a commitment to go to at least one of these events or groups.

Note: Some people use chat groups and other connections on the Internet as a way to make friends and to relieve loneliness. While this can be a good short-term way to connect with others, avoid sharing personal information and your phone and address with people you do not know well or whom you have not met in person.

Reaching out to establish a friendship sometimes happens simply and casually. At other times, it takes special effort. If you feel you need and want to take some action so a person you have met becomes a friend, you could —

- ask the person to join you at a cafe for coffee or lunch, to go for a walk, or to engage in some other activity with you
- call the person on the phone to share a piece of good news you think they might be interested in
- send a short, friendly e-mail and see if they respond

- chat with them about something of interest to both of you
- offer to help the person with a particular task if you think it would be appreciated

Even window-shopping with another person can be good, especially if there is a theme, even humorous, like “I’m going to find something in the window I could wear to a Halloween party.” A woman in the focus group said she went window-shopping with a friend. They tried on lots of clothes that they’d buy if they had the money, and it was great fun. Test the waters by proceeding slowly. As you both enjoy each other more, the friendship deepens. Notice how you feel about yourself when you are with the other person. If you feel good about yourself, you may be on the road to a fulfilling friendship.

If you have never had a close friend, you may have a hard time knowing when to take action that will allow the friendship to deepen. A friendship may be starting to get closer if you are feeling more comfortable with that person, you feel content and at ease when the two of you are together, and you feel disappointed when you and the other person can’t get together, but you don’t “fall apart.” You can be aware of how the other person is feeling when they are with you by listening closely to what they are saying, by noticing their body language and responses, and by asking them.

Don’t overwhelm the person with phone calls or other kinds of contact. Use your intuition and common sense to determine when to call and how often. Don’t ever call late at night or early in the morning until you both have agreed to be available to each other in emergencies (for example, one of you is sick or has gotten some very bad news).

Activity: Think of a time when someone called you too often or disturbed you when you were sleeping. How did it make you feel?

Guidelines for Keeping Your Friendships Strong

Like yourself. If you don’t like yourself, don’t feel that you have any value, or don’t think others will like you, you will have a hard time reaching out to people who may become friends. Work on building your self-esteem by treating yourself well—eating healthy foods, getting plenty of exercise and rest, doing things that you enjoy—and by reminding yourself over and over that you are a very special and worthwhile person.

Activities: Go to the library and get a book to read on building self-esteem. Make a list of at least five things that you do well. Make a sign that says “I am a wonderful person.” Hang it in a place where you will see it often—like on your refrigerator door or on the mirror in your bathroom.

Have a variety of interests. Develop interests in different things—it will open opportunities for connection with others and make you more interesting person that others enjoy being with. Some interests include music, art, crafts, gardening, watching or participating in sports activities, or fixing cars.

Activity: Make a list of your interests. Hang it on your refrigerator or in another convenient place. It will act as a reminder when you are having a hard time thinking of things to do.

Enjoy spending time alone. If you don’t enjoy spending time alone, you may feel desperate to have people around you all the time. This desperation can drive others away from you. You can learn to enjoy spending time alone by —

- developing interests and hobbies that you can do by yourself
- anticipating times you will be spending alone and arranging to do some special things for yourself during those times
- changing your attitude about time alone so you enjoy spending a reasonable amount of time alone

- addressing any fears you may have about being alone and doing everything you can to ensure you will be safe, such as locking doors and windows.

Many people have found that pets are a wonderful way to enjoy time alone and to help relieve the loneliness.

Activity: If you are uncomfortable when you are alone, set aside an hour of time when you can be alone. Make a plan of something enjoyable you can do during that time that focuses on you, like painting a picture, playing a musical instrument, journaling, or taking a walk (not watching television, working, or using the computer). Try to do this at least once a week. As you become comfortable with time alone, set aside longer periods of time alone for yourself.

Have plenty of friends. Work on having several friends so that someone is always available when you would like companionship or support. Expect to have many friends because you are worth it. Relying on only one or two people puts too much pressure on everyone. Some people like to have more friends than others, so the number is really up to your own sense of what you need, but a good goal for most people is to have five close friends.

Activity: Make a list of your friends with their phone numbers to keep at a convenient place for easy reference. If you don't feel that you have any friends right now, list your health care professionals and family members. Add friends to your list as you make them.

Take action to make new friends. To make new friends, you have to take action. You can do it as slowly or as quickly as you want, taking small steps or big steps. You can also work on improving your relationships with people already in your life by doing things like inviting them to your home to chat, share a meal, play a game, watch a video, or share some other activity, or by doing a favor for them when they are having a hard time.

Activity: Do something that puts you in contact with others. Go to an event in your community. Join a group.

Communicate openly. To communicate openly with another person, you need to have a feeling of trust with him or her. This develops gradually over time as you come to know the person better and your friendship becomes closer. Tell your friends what you need and want and ask them what they want and need from you. Tell them all important pieces of information, but do not share so much information about minute details that the other person gets bored. Watch the response you are getting from the person or people you are talking to so you can know if this is the right time to be sharing this information or the right subject for the person. You may need to change what you are saying and when you are saying it according to the response you observe. Avoid sharing details of traumatic events that might upset the other person.

Depending on what you are talking about, you may want to talk in a place that is private and where you won't be interrupted, that is congenial and physically comfortable, and that is quiet with few distractions.

Activity: Think about something special that is going on in your life. Tell a friend or someone you know and like about it. Ask them to tell you about something special that is going on in their life.

Listen and share equally. Listen closely to what the other person is saying. Let the other person know you are paying close attention through eye contact, body language and occasional brief comments like, "I knew you could do it," "That sounds like fun," or "I bet you wish it had happened some other way." Avoid thinking about what your response is going to be while the person is talking. If a person is sharing something intense and personal, give them your full attention. Don't share an "I can top that" story.

Avoid giving others advice unless they ask for it. Just listening is fine! In some cases, you can summarize what you hear them saying or ask clarifying questions, but it is never necessary to "fix the problem" for them. People often need to share the details of hard times or difficult experiences over and over again, until they have "gotten it out of their system" or figured out a way to take some action or solve the problem. You can be a really good friend by listening to the same story again and again, reassuring that it is OK to do this. Never make fun of what the other person thinks or feels. Avoid judging or criticizing the other person.

Sometimes it may be important to be realistic about how much time you can spend listening and let the other person know how much time you have. Be sure that you also have about equal time to share whatever it is you would like to share. Don't be embarrassed by emotions that come up for you or the other person while you are sharing.

Activity: Practice listening closely to someone who is telling you about a hard time they are having. Give them your full attention. Let them know you care by saying things like “I am sorry you are having such a hard time.”

Activity: Arrange to spend half an hour with a friend or someone you know, even a family member. Agree to share the time equally—one of you talks for the first fifteen minutes while the other listens—and then you change roles.

Take equal responsibility for the friendship. Both people in a friendship need to take responsibility for the friendship. For instance, you should be making plans for shared activities some of the time and your friend should be making these plans some of the time. If you are taking all of the responsibility for the friendship, talk to your friend about it and figure out a way to make the friendship more equal.

Activity: Contact someone who has recently invited you to an activity or done something special for you and return the favor. If you can't think of anyone who has invited you anywhere or done something special for you, do something nice for someone who is nice to you—like complimenting a store clerk who is bagging your groceries or thanking your mail delivery person for being so prompt.

Keep personal information confidential. As you feel more and more comfortable with the other person, you will find that you talk more and share more personal information. Have a mutual understanding that anything personal the two of you discuss is absolutely confidential and that you will not share personal information about each other with other people.

Activity: Write, “I will never share any personal information that another person shares with me.” Read it over and over to remind yourself.

Have a good time. Spend most of your time with your friends doing fun, interesting activities, together. Sometimes friendships get “bogged down” if all you ever do is talk about each others struggles. Go to a movie, walk on the beach, play ball, watch a fun video, work on an art project, cook a meal—whatever would be fun for both of you. Take turns suggesting and initiating these activities.

Activity: Call a friend, or someone you know who you hope will become a friend, and ask them to share a fun activity with you—like going to a movie, watching a video, or making supper together.

Stay in touch. Maintain regular contact with your friends and supporters, even when things are going well. Give them a call, send them a note or an e-mail. Always have a plan for your next meeting—whether it is tomorrow or next month. If you have to change it, do so, but always have a plan. If you can't end a visit by making a plan, make a plan to make a plan, such as “I'll call you Saturday to find a time we can get together.” If something you want to share comes up in the meantime, you can arrange a get-together by phone or in person, but always have something planned.

You will find that regular, scheduled contact is the best way to assure that your friendship will remain strong. It means making a commitment to the friendship. Many people find it is helpful to plan ahead for times when they know they may feel lonely, like on the weekend, in the evening, or on holidays. Plan get-togethers for these hard times at least several days in advance and, especially around the holidays, even further ahead. It often is difficult to make last-minute plans for time together with friends.

Activity: Call a friend or someone you hope will become a friend and arrange to get together at a time when you know it might be hard for you to be alone.

Home visits. Good friends often spend time in each other's homes. By making these times together special, you can enrich your friendships. You can make your friends feel welcome and comfortable in your home by

focusing your full attention on your friends when they are in your home, having a clear, comfortable area for visiting, turning off the television and radio when you are talking or involved in an activity together, and asking other family members to be friendly and welcoming but not too intrusive. Confine pets that may overwhelm or frighten your friends.

Activity: Call and invite a friend or someone you hope will become a friend for a visit in your home.

Losing a friend. Everyone loses a friend from time to time because of things like moving, changes in life focus, relationship difficulties, or even death. This is difficult for everyone. Spend some time “being with” the sadness that you feel—as much time as you feel you need. Take time to cry, if that feels right to you. Then, spend time with other friends and do things that you enjoy. You even may want to begin making some new friends when you feel ready to do that. The sadness from losing a friend may never go away. You will adjust to it and your life will feel good again.

Activity: Talk about the loss of this special person with an understanding friend or someone you know well.

Establishing and Honoring Boundaries

Feelings inside of you (intuition) let you know who you do and don’t want to be close to. Sometimes you may want to be close to a person but are confused by questions of boundaries. You may ask yourself questions like “Have I called too much this week?” “Have I stayed too long; should I leave now?” “Should I offer to help her with the children or would she be uncomfortable with that?” It’s appropriate to ask yourself such questions. Boundaries may differ from person to person. You may feel comfortable with some people calling you whenever they feel like it, but you may want to put some restriction around calls from other people. You may not want to go to certain kinds of activities with some friends but be happy to go to the same activity with others.

People commonly set limits or boundaries around things like —

- the amount of time spent together and place to get together
- the kind and frequency of shared activities
- phone call time limits—time of day, frequency, and length
- connection with family
- amount of physical touch
- topics of conversation

In all relationships, you have the right to define your own limits and boundaries so you feel comfortable and safe. Say “no” to anything you don’t want. You have the right to ask for what you need, want, and deserve. Expect and insist that others respect your boundaries and, as a good friend, always respect their boundaries.

Activity: Make a list of boundaries that you have or think you would want to have in friendships.

Resolving Problems in Relationships

Because each situation is different, you will have to use your resourcefulness, along with good communication skills and other strategies, to decide what to do and what action to take each time a difficult situation comes up or you become aware of a difference that is keeping your friendship from being a good one. Some things you can do include —

- talk with the other person using “I” statements that describe how you feel in a situation rather than making an assumption about how the other person feels
- work with your friend to develop a plan to resolve the situation, including the steps each of you will take and when you will take them (check in with each other often about your progress)

- do a reality check with yourself, asking yourself what is really happening, and deciding on solutions that will work for you
- be clear with yourself and with your friends about your boundaries, saying “no” when necessary

Activity: List any other ideas you might have to solve problems in relationships

Building Skills That Enhance Friendships

Everyone brings special qualities friendships—qualities that make friendships richer and stronger. The following is a list of some of these qualities —

- being independent and self-sufficient
- being positive, upbeat, and warm
- talking about others in a positive way
- being honest and dependable
- doing your share of both the talking and listening
- being respectful of the other person’s feelings
- keeping yourself clean and well-groomed
- accepting your individual differences
- listening closely without interrupting
- being nonjudgmental
- giving the other person plenty of “space”

Activity: Make a list of the strengths you bring to your friendships or to the people in your life, including any from the list above. Give yourself credit for these positive attributes.

Creating Change. List the things you would like to work on that you think would make it easier for you to make and keep friends. Acknowledging that you want to improve and reminding yourself of this desire from time to time will create the personal change you are seeking. Ask your family members and friends to support you in these efforts. You may want to ask a health care professional for additional advice and support. Self-help books will give you ideas for creating this change. Of most importance is your determination to change. Remember that everyone has areas that need improvement. Change takes time. Pat yourself on the back for your efforts.

Activity: Think of a time when you created some change in your life that made your life better.

Life circumstances that make friendships difficult. Factors over which neither you nor the other person have any control can make it difficult to be friends. You may want to be friends or closer friends, but one of these issues may get in the way —

- illness
- distance
- stress
- overwork
- fear
- financial problems or poverty
- differences in expectations
- extreme differences in interests
- lack of transportation

It is important to acknowledge these difficulties, but don’t give up on the friendship if you don’t want to! These factors are challenging, but not impossible! Some factors must simply be accepted—such as distance, and others you can work on changing—such as fear or overwork. For example, a woman in her fifties has been very close friends most of her life with a woman she first met at camp when she was a child. Now they live in

different States and their busy lives keep them from being together as much as they would like. They keep their friendship strong through weekly e-mails.

Activity: What is a life circumstance that makes it difficult to keep up with one of your friendships or with a person you know well? Using all of your creativity, write five possible ways to resolve this difficulty. If you can't think of enough ideas, ask a friends for suggestions. Then try doing one or more of these things.

Is this friendship a good idea? Sometimes it is better to avoid getting closely involved with a person or to end a friendship. You may want to stop being friends with a person if they —

- share personal information about others
- do all the talking and not listening
- violate your boundaries
- put others or you down
- tease, ridicule, taunt, “badmouth” friends and family
- lie or are dishonest
- want you to be their friend only or want you to spend all your time with them
- want to always know where you are and who you are with
- don't want to be seen with you in public
- are clingy or very needy
- talk inappropriately about sex or personal matters
- ask questions that make you feel uncomfortable
- ask for risky favors
- engage in illegal behavior
- are physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive

Before you end the friendship, you may want to talk about the troubling behavior. If the person stops doing it, you may be able to continue your friendship. To help you decide if you want to end a friendship, ask yourself the following questions —

Is this person always this way or just this way once in a while?

Is this person having a hard time right now that might be affecting their behavior?

Are you having a hard time right now that may be affecting your feelings and the way you see things?

Do you often enjoy this friendship or do you sometimes feel hurt?

You may be tempted to pursue a relationship with someone even though the person treats you or others badly. However, most people agree it is better not to have a certain friend than to have a person treat you badly. If the things another person says to you or does to you make you feel hurt and the person won't stop doing those kinds of things, he or she is not your friend. It is always your choice whether or not to be friends with another person. Reach out to others for information and advice, but the final decision should always be yours.

Getting started. The common-sense information in this booklet comes from people like yourself. It will help you in strengthening those friendships you already have and in making and keeping new friends—friends who will increase your wellness and satisfaction with life. Decide for yourself how best to begin the process of making and keeping friendships.

Activity: Write down a goal for yourself about making and keeping friends. Write down the steps you will take to reach your goal. Keep this information where you will see it and remember to continue to work on it. When you have reached your goal, give yourself a “ pat on the back” and then set another goal for yourself.

Set a small daily goal for yourself each day that will help you make new friends or keep your friendships strong like —

- calling one friend or someone you know well
- doing something nice for someone else
- finding out about a support group
- attending a support group
- sending a friend or someone else you know a card or an e-mail.

List some other possible daily goals that you think you could achieve.

Now you are well on the way to expanding your circle of friends.

Further Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
Center for Mental Health Services
Web site: www.samhsa.gov

SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center
P.O. Box 42557
Washington, D.C. 20015
1 (800) 789-2647 (voice)
Web site: www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov

Consumer Organization and Networking Technical Assistance Center
(CONTAC)
P.O. Box 11000
Charleston, WV 25339
1 (888) 825-TECH (8324)
(304) 346-9992 (fax)
Web site: www.contac.org

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)
(formerly the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association)
730 N. Franklin Street, Suite 501
Chicago, IL 60610-3526
(800) 826-3632
Web site: www.dbsalliance.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)
(Special Support Center)
Colonial Place Three
2107 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201-3042
(703) 524-7600
Web site: www.nami.org

National Empowerment Center
599 Canal Street, 5 East
Lawrence, MA 01840
1-800-power2u
(800)TDD-POWER (TDD)
(978)681-6426 (fax)
Web site: www.power2u.org

National Mental Health Consumers'
Self-Help Clearinghouse
1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1207
Philadelphia, PA 19107
1 (800) 553-4539 (voice)
(215) 636-6312 (fax)
e-mail: info@mhselfhelp.org
Web site: www.mhselfhelp.org

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