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This Month’s Focus: Healthy Relationships

Research shows that strong relationships can help us stay healthier and live longer, says Mayo Clinic. You can probably think of several recent examples from your own life. Maybe your spouse's healthy habits inspired you to get moving. Or a friend's kind words made you feel better after a tough day at work.

Any type of relationship takes time, effort and good communication to thrive. This month's Member Matters includes tips for building stronger relationships so you - and yours - can live healthier and happier.
Friendships: Enrich your life and improve your health

Friendships can be good for you. Find out about the connection between your health and friendship, and how to promote and maintain healthy friendships.

Friendships can have a major impact on your health and well-being, but it's not always easy to build or maintain friendships. Understand the importance of friendships in your life and what you can do to develop and nurture friendships.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF FRIENDSHIPS?

Good friends are good for your health. Friends can help you celebrate good times and provide support during bad times. Friends prevent loneliness and give you a chance to offer needed companionship, too. Friends can also:

- Increase your sense of belonging and purpose
- Boost your happiness
- Reduce stress
- Improve your self-worth
- Help you cope with traumas, such as divorce, serious illness, job loss or the death of a loved one
- Encourage you to change or avoid unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as excessive drinking or lack of exercise

WHY IS IT SOMETIMES HARD TO MAKE FRIENDS OR MAINTAIN FRIENDSHIPS?

Many adults find it hard to develop new friendships or keep up existing friendships. Friendships may take a back seat to other priorities, such as work or caring for children or aging parents. You and your friends may have grown apart due to changes in your lives or interests. Or maybe you've moved to a new community and haven't yet found a way to meet people. Developing and maintaining good friendships takes effort. The enjoyment and comfort friendship can provide, however, makes the investment worthwhile.

WHAT'S A HEALTHY NUMBER OF FRIENDS?

There's no need to aim for a specific number of friends. Some people benefit from a large and diverse network of friends, while others prefer a smaller circle of friends and acquaintances. There are also different types of friendship. You may have a few close friends you turn to for deeply personal conversations, and more casual friends with whom you see movies, play basketball or share backyard cookouts. Consider what works for you. Overall, the quality of your relationships is more important than the specific number of friends you have.

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS TO MEET NEW PEOPLE?

You can take steps to meet people and develop friendships. For example:

- **Take your child — or pet — for a walk.** Chat with neighbors who are also out and about or head to a popular park and strike up conversations there.
- **Work out.** Take a class at a local gym, senior center or community fitness facility. Start a lunchtime walking group at work.
- **Do lunch.** Invite an acquaintance to join you for coffee or a meal.
- **Accept invites.** When you're invited to a social gathering, say yes. Contact someone who recently invited you to an activity and return the favor.
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.

Attend community events. Get together with a group of people working toward a goal you believe in, such as an election or the cleanup of a natural area. Find a group with similar interests in an activity, such as auto racing, gardening, reading or making crafts.

Go to school. Take a college or community education course to meet people who have similar interests.

Join a faith community. Take advantage of special activities and get-to-know-you events for new members.

Above all, stay positive. You may not become friends with everyone you meet, but maintaining a friendly attitude and demeanor can help you improve the relationships in your life and sow the seeds of friendship with new acquaintances.

HOW DOES SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECT FRIENDSHIPS?

Joining a chat group or online community might help you make or maintain connections and relieve loneliness. However, research suggests that use of social networking sites doesn't necessarily translate to a larger offline network or closer offline relationships with network members. In addition, remember to exercise caution when sharing personal information or arranging an activity with someone you've only met online.

HOW CAN I NURTURE MY FRIENDSHIPS?

Developing and maintaining healthy friendships involves give-and-take. Sometimes you're the one giving support, and other times you're on the receiving end. Letting friends know you care about them and appreciate them can help strengthen your bond. It's as important for you to be a good friend as it is to surround yourself with good friends.

To nurture your friendships:

- Go easy. Don't overwhelm friends with phone calls, texts, instant messages or emails. Respect your friends' boundaries.

- Don't compete. Don't let friendships turn into a battle over who makes the most money or who has the nicest home.

- Adopt a healthy, realistic self-image. Work on building your self-esteem by taking care of yourself — eat a healthy diet and include physical activity in your daily routine. Vanity and constant self-criticism can be turnoffs to potential friends.

- Avoid relentless complaining. Nonstop complaining can put a strain on your friendships. Talk to your friends about how you can change the parts of your life that make you unhappy.

- Adopt a positive outlook. Try to find the humor in things. Laughter is infectious and appealing.

- Listen up. Ask what's going on in your friends' lives. Avoid talking about your own problems all the time. Try to only give advice when your friends ask for it.

- Don't judge. Give your friends space to change, grow and make mistakes. Encourage your friends to freely express their emotions.

- Respect privacy. Keep confidential any personal information that your friends share with you. Try not to ask questions that make your friends uncomfortable.

Remember, it's never too late to build new friendships or reconnect with old friends. Investing time in making friends and strengthening your friendships can pay off in better health and a brighter outlook for years to come.
Forgiveness: Letting go of grudges and bitterness

When someone you care about hurts you, you can hold on to anger, resentment and thoughts of revenge — or embrace forgiveness and move forward.

Nearly everyone has been hurt by the actions or words of another. Perhaps your mother criticized your parenting skills, your colleague sabotaged a project or your partner had an affair. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger, bitterness or even vengeance — but if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

Generally, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you might always remain a part of your life, but forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF FORGIVING SOMEONE?

Letting go of grudges and bitterness can make way for compassion, kindness and peace. Forgiveness can lead to:

- Healthier relationships
- Greater spiritual and psychological well-being
- Less anxiety, stress and hostility
- Lower blood pressure
- Fewer symptoms of depression
- Lower risk of alcohol and substance abuse

WHY IS IT SO EASY TO HOLD A GRUDGE?

When you're hurt by someone you love and trust, you might become angry, sad or confused. If you dwell on hurtful events or situations, grudges filled with resentment, vengeance and hostility can take root. If you allow negative feelings to crowd out positive feelings, you might find yourself swallowed up by your own bitterness or sense of injustice.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF HOLDING A GRUDGE?

If you're unforgiving, you might pay the price repeatedly by bringing anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience. Your life might become so wrapped up in the wrong that you can't enjoy the present. You might become depressed or anxious. You might feel that your life lacks meaning or purpose, or that you're at odds with your spiritual beliefs. You might lose valuable and enriching connectedness with others.
HOW DO I REACH A STATE OF FORGIVENESS?

Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change. To begin, you might:

- Consider the value of forgiveness and its importance in your life at a given time
- Reflect on the facts of the situation, how you've reacted, and how this combination has affected your life, health and well-being
- When you're ready, actively choose to forgive the person who's offended you
- Move away from your role as victim and release the control and power the offending person and situation have had in your life

As you let go of grudges, you'll no longer define your life by how you've been hurt. You might even find compassion and understanding.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I CAN'T FORGIVE SOMEONE?

 Forgiveness can be challenging, especially if the person who's hurt you doesn't admit wrong or doesn't speak of his or her sorrow. If you find yourself stuck, consider the situation from the other person's point of view. Ask yourself why he or she would behave in such a way. Perhaps you would have reacted similarly if you faced the same situation. In addition, consider broadening your view of the world. Expect occasional imperfections from the people in your life. You might want to reflect on times you've hurt others and on those who've forgiven you. It can also be helpful to write in a journal, pray or use guided meditation — or talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a spiritual leader, a mental health provider, or an impartial loved one or friend.

DOES FORGIVENESS GUARANTEE RECONCILIATION?

 If the hurtful event involved someone whose relationship you otherwise value, forgiveness can lead to reconciliation. This isn't always the case, however. Reconciliation might be impossible if the offender has died or is unwilling to communicate with you. In other cases, reconciliation might not be appropriate. Still, forgiveness is possible — even if reconciliation isn't.

WHAT IF I HAVE TO INTERACT WITH THE PERSON WHO HURT ME BUT I DON'T WANT TO?

 If you haven't reached a state of forgiveness, being near the person who hurt you might be tense and stressful. To handle these situations, remember that you can choose to attend or avoid specific functions and gatherings. Respect yourself and do what seems best. If you choose to attend, don't be surprised by a certain amount of awkwardness and perhaps even more intense feelings. Do your best to keep an open heart and mind. You might find that the experience helps you to move forward with forgiveness.

WHAT IF THE PERSON I'M FORGIVING DOESN'T CHANGE?

 Getting another person to change his or her actions, behavior or words isn't the point of forgiveness. Think of forgiveness more about how it can change your life — by bringing you peace, happiness, and emotional and spiritual healing. Forgiveness can take away the power the other person continues to wield in your life.

WHAT IF I'M THE ONE WHO NEEDS FORGIVENESS?

 The first step is to honestly assess and acknowledge the wrongs you've done and how those wrongs have affected others. At the same time, avoid judging yourself too harshly. You're human, and you'll make mistakes. If you're truly sorry for something you've said or done, consider admitting it to those you've harmed. Speak of your sincere sorrow or regret, and specifically ask for forgiveness — without making excuses. Remember, however, you can't force someone to forgive you. Others need to move to forgiveness in their own time. Whatever the outcome, commit to treating others with compassion, empathy and respect.
Being assertive: Reduce stress, communicate better

Assertiveness can help you control stress and anger and improve coping skills. Recognize and learn assertive behavior and communication.

Being assertive is a core communication skill. Being assertive means that you express yourself effectively and stand up for your point of view, while also respecting the rights and beliefs of others. Being assertive can also help boost your self-esteem and earn others' respect. This can help with stress management, especially if you tend to take on too many responsibilities because you have a hard time saying no.

Some people seem to be naturally assertive. But if you're not one of them, you can learn to be more assertive.

WHY ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION MAKES SENSE

Because assertiveness is based on mutual respect, it's an effective and diplomatic communication style. Being assertive shows that you respect yourself, because you're willing to stand up for your interests and express your thoughts and feelings. It also demonstrates that you're aware of the rights of others and are willing to work on resolving conflicts.

Of course, it's not just what you say — your message — but also how you say it that's important. Assertive communication is direct and respectful. Being assertive gives you the best chance of successfully delivering your message. If you communicate in a way that's too passive or too aggressive, your message may get lost because people are too busy reacting to your delivery.

ASSERTIVE VS. PASSIVE BEHAVIOR

If your style is passive, you may seem to be shy or overly easygoing. You may routinely say things such as, "I'll just go with whatever the group decides." You tend to avoid conflict. Why is that a problem? Because the message you're sending is that your thoughts and feelings aren't as important as those of other people. In essence, when you're too passive, you give others the license to disregard your wants and needs.

Consider this example: You say yes when a colleague asks you to take over a project, even though your plate is full and the extra works means you'll have to work overtime and miss your daughter's soccer game. Your intention may be to keep the peace. But always saying yes can poison your relationships. And worse, it may cause you internal conflict because your needs and those of your family always come second.

The internal conflict that can be created by passive behavior can lead to:

- Stress
- Resentment
- Seething anger
- Feelings of victimization
- Desire to exact revenge

ASSERTIVE VS. AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Now consider the flip side. If your style is aggressive, you may come across as a bully who disregards the needs, feelings and opinions of others. You may appear self-righteous or superior. Very aggressive people humiliate and intimidate others, and may even be physically threatening. You may think that being aggressive gets you what you want. However, it comes at a cost. Aggression undercuts trust and mutual respect. Others may come to resent you, leading them to avoid or oppose you.
ASSERTIVE VS. PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Now consider passive-aggressive behavior. If you communicate in a passive-aggressive manner, you may say yes when you want to say no. You may be sarcastic or complain about others behind their backs. You may have developed a passive-aggressive style because you're uncomfortable being direct about your needs and feelings.

What are the drawbacks of a passive-aggressive communication style? Over time, passive-aggressive behavior damages relationships and undercuts mutual respect, making it difficult for you to get your goals and needs met.

THE BENEFITS OF BEING ASSERTIVE

Being assertive is typically viewed as a healthier communication style. Being assertive offers many benefits. It helps you keep people from walking all over you. On the flip side, it can also help you from steamrolling others.

Behaving assertively can help you:

- Gain self-confidence and self-esteem
- Understand and recognize your feelings
- Earn respect from others
- Improve communication
- Create win-win situations
- Improve your decision-making skills
- Create honest relationships
- Gain more job satisfaction

Some research even suggests that learning to be more assertive can help people cope with mental health problems, such as depression, anorexia, bulimia, social anxiety disorder and schizophrenia.

LEARNING TO BE MORE ASSERTIVE

People develop different styles of communication based on their life experiences. Your style may be so ingrained that you're not even aware of what it is. People tend to stick to the same communication style over time. But if you want to change your communication style, you can learn to communicate in healthier and more effective ways.

Here are some tips to help you become more assertive:

- **Assess your style.** Do you voice your opinions or remain silent? Do you say yes to additional work even when your plate is full? Are you quick to judge or blame? Do people seem to dread or fear talking to you? Understand your style before you begin making changes.
- **Use 'I' statements.** Using "I" statements lets others know what you're thinking without sounding accusatory. For instance, say, "I disagree," rather than, "You're wrong."
- **Practice saying no.** If you have a hard time turning down requests, try saying, "No, I can't do that now." Don't beat around the bush — be direct. If an explanation is appropriate, keep it brief.
- **Rehearse what you want to say.** If it's challenging to say what you want or think, practice typical scenarios you encounter. Say what you want to say out loud. It may help to write it out first, too, so you can practice from a script. Consider role playing with a friend or colleague and ask for blunt feedback.
- **Use body language.** Communication isn't just verbal. Act confident even if you aren't feeling it. Keep an upright posture, but lean forward a bit. Make regular eye contact. Maintain a neutral or positive facial expression. Don't wring your hands or use dramatic gestures. Practice assertive body language in front of a mirror or with a friend or colleague.
- **Keep emotions in check.** Conflict is hard for most people. Maybe you get angry or frustrated, or maybe you feel like crying. Although these feelings are normal, they can get in the way of resolving conflict. If you feel too emotional going into a situation, wait a bit if possible. Then work on remaining calm. Breathe slowly. Keep your voice even and firm.

- **Start small.** At first, practice your new skills in situations that are low risk. For instance, try out your assertiveness on a partner or friend before tackling a difficult situation at work. Evaluate yourself afterward and tweak your approach as necessary.

### WHEN YOU NEED HELP BEING ASSERTIVE

Remember, learning to be assertive takes time and practice. If you've spent years silencing yourself, becoming more assertive probably won't happen overnight. Or if anger leads you to be too aggressive, you may need to learn some anger management techniques.

If despite your best efforts you're not making progress toward becoming more assertive, consider formal assertiveness training. And if issues such as anger, stress, anxiety or fear are getting in your way, consider talking with a mental health provider. The payoff will be worth it. By becoming more assertive, you can begin to express your true feelings and needs more easily. You may even find you get more of what you want as a result.

### Communicating effectively with your spouse

While romance might get a relationship started, good communication keeps it going. These healthy communication habits can help you strengthen your bonds with your spouse:

**MAKE INTIMACY A PRIORITY**

With busy schedules and multiple demands, it's easy to let your need for intimate contact with your spouse slide; but intimacy strengthens a relationship like nothing else can. No matter how busy you are with work and family obligations, try to spend private time regularly with your spouse. Even if you don't have time for romance, use the time to talk about the successes and frustrations of your day.

**FIND A GOOD TIME TO TALK ABOUT DIFFICULT SUBJECTS**

When you have something difficult to talk about, check with your mate for a specific time to discuss it. Resist the temptation to talk when he or she walks in the door after a hard day at work. Try choosing a subject you want to discuss, and both of you write about it for 10 minutes; then talk about it for 10 minutes. Make sure you stick to the time frame. If you need more time, agree on when you can talk about it again.

**FOCUS YOUR CONCERNS**

Think about what you want to say before you begin to talk. With sensitive topics, it might be tempting to avoid talking about what's on your mind. Get right to the point and after you've stated your request, listen closely to your spouse's reply. Stay focused on finding solutions to problems rather than on emphasizing differences.

**LET BOTH SIDES BE HEARD**

When you have a disagreement, remember that both of your needs are important. Use a firm and gentle tone of voice in stating what you need, why you need it and what you want your mate to do. However, try not to elevate your needs above your spouse's. Listen and show that you see things from your spouse's perspective.
Conflict is a normal part of healthy relationships. But remember, your safety always comes first. If you suspect that you are the victim of abuse (physical or emotional), either currently or in the past, seek help. If you are uncertain, a therapist may assist you in helping to identify any possible issues. If you are in immediate danger, call 9-1-1.

**BE HONEST BUT NOT ACCUSATORY**

It's easy to blame the other person when you're angry or hurt, but blaming only invites retaliation. Talk about your feelings instead. For instance, avoid saying "You ruined the plans again. You're always late." Instead, using "I" statements, say: "I'm very disappointed that you were late. I was counting on you to be home in time." This approach is less likely to provoke a defensive response and more likely to encourage an open discussion.

**VALUE YOUR DIFFERENCES**

Sometimes the differences in your temperaments and communication styles will be more evident than your similarities. When you feel this way, how and what you communicate to your spouse will determine how effectively you solve your problems. Appreciate your differences and you'll learn to work together better.

Getting Started is Easy!

Call your EAP for more information