



Maintaining relationships – in the pandemic and beyond

Relationships aren't just for fun. They're essential to our physical and mental well-being. When we don't have social connections, we have an increased risk of depression, anxiety, heart disease and stroke.¹ We're also more likely to have trouble sleeping and experience accelerated cognitive decline.² Loneliness is even associated with a 40% increase in a person's risk of dementia.¹

Even if we know their importance, keeping friend, family and couple relationships strong can be challenging. During the pandemic, it has become even more difficult with added stresses like unexpectedly working from home, daycare closings and differing opinions on COVID-19 vaccination.

Also, daily experiences can vary greatly from one person to the next. While some people stay at home as much as possible, others have been less cautious and have returned to a busy social life. Resentments can emerge, and some relationships may be struggling to survive the distance that the pandemic has created.

You may feel more alone than usual right now. Or quite the opposite, you may feel like you never get a moment to yourself. No matter the situation, there are steps you can take to strengthen relationships.



Keeping conversations open and frequent can help us get through tough situations.

Creating strong conversations

Couples, roommates or anyone else sharing spaces or responsibilities may feel even more stressed than usual. For couples with children or parents who need support, there may be resentment because one partner has taken on the weight of extra caregiving. Keeping conversations open and frequent can help us get through tough situations. But before we start talking, there are a couple of things to remember.

When we're stressed, we aren't as good at having conversations with our partners and supporting them.³ That's why we have to check our emotions. If you're angry, take time to calm down first. Also, take a moment to remember all that you like about your partner, so you can enter the conversation with more openness to their feelings.³



Keep in mind that sometimes people grow apart and friendships end. When that happens, it's OK to grieve.

Assessing friendships

The number of friends we have has decreased over time.⁴ While this trend began long before the pandemic, new pressures surely add to the challenges many friendships are facing. While some people want to withdraw, others want to connect more. And while some friendships can exist across cities or even countries for years, others wane without in-person time.

If you think a friendship may be ending and it's important to you, check in on it. When a friend stops responding, for instance, ask them if they're just too busy or if there's something upsetting them that they want to talk about. That openness may strengthen the bond you have.⁴ But keep in mind that sometimes people grow apart and friendships end. When that happens, it's OK to grieve.

Getting through disagreements

Differing views on politics, religion and other tough topics have long been a challenge. For many families, disagreements about pandemic safety measures have added to the pressure. Before you get pulled into an argument, plan for a healthy conversation.

Aim for understanding. Chances are you won't change someone's mind, so don't expect to. Instead, try to understand why someone feels a certain way. Opinions are often rooted in concerns about finances, the environment or other topics that are a key part of our values.⁵

Be respectful. Avoid personal attacks or placing someone in a group and saying that the whole group is stupid, evil, etc.⁵

Know when to stop. When a conversation isn't going anywhere, end it. Or set boundaries and avoid the topic in the first place.⁵

Give yourself space. During times when controversy seems especially strong – like right before a big election or when COVID-19 rates are high – we may need more space. It's OK to take a break from those we disagree with, but know that the break doesn't have to last forever.⁴

Address grudges. Holding onto a grudge for years can affect our mental health. If you've been holding onto strong feelings about a situation, it may be time to talk about what you're feeling. Someone else may not understand that they've upset you. Talk to them privately, and be willing to forgive them if they apologize. Keep in mind that reconciliation can take time,⁵ and forgiving someone doesn't mean you excuse their actions. It simply means you're no longer filled with resentment toward them.⁶

The pandemic has caused many of us to rethink our relationships – and take steps to make sure we aren't taking them for granted. It's a lesson that can help us long into the future, but it can be a tough one to learn. If you're struggling with a relationship or feeling alone, support is available.

Reach out to your Employee Assistance Program anytime to speak with someone who cares.

1. American Psychological Association (APA). The risks of social isolation. [apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation). May 2019. Accessed February 4, 2022.

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Loneliness and social isolation linked to serious health conditions. [cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html](https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html). Last reviewed April 29, 2021. Accessed February 4, 2022.

3. APA. Four ways to strengthen couples' relationships now. [apa.org/topics/covid-19/strengthen-couples-relationships](https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/strengthen-couples-relationships). June 12, 2020. Accessed February 4, 2022.

4. APA. Speaking of psychology: Why is it so hard for adults to make friends? With Marisa Franco, PhD. [apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/adult-friendships](https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/adult-friendships). January 2022. Accessed February 4, 2022.

5. HelpGuide. Dealing with difficult family relationships. [helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-difficult-family-relationships.htm](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/dealing-with-difficult-family-relationships.htm). Last updated January 2022. Accessed February 4, 2022.

6. APA. Forgiveness. [dictionary.apa.org/forgiveness](https://www.dictionary.apa.org/forgiveness). Accessed February 4, 2022.

This program should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call 911 if you are in the United States or the local emergency services phone number if you are outside the United States, or go to the nearest accident and emergency department. This program is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly or indirectly (e.g., employer or health plan). This program and all its components, in particular services to family members below the age of 16, may not be available in all locations and are subject to change without prior notice. Experience and/or educational levels of Employee Assistance Program resources may vary based on contract requirements or country regulatory requirements. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.

Optum® is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are trademarks or registered marks or the property of their respective owners. Optum is an equal opportunity employer.

© 2022 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved.