

## Building Social Support Networks



Research shows that having a good “social support network”—having people in your life you can talk to, spend time with, and get help from—makes people mentally and physically healthier. However, there can be barriers to having an adequate social network: Being socially anxious or depressed can get in the way of meeting people or maintaining connections. Being in a new place where you don’t know a lot of people or haven’t had the time to deepen your relationships can lead to a lack of good support. And, some people just haven’t had the chance to learn or strengthen the skills for meeting people and cultivating good

relationships. It takes some action on your part to improve your social network. Even if you are hesitant or don’t feel like it, the benefits can be worth it. The following tips can be helpful.

### General Tips

1. No matter the reason for needing a better social network, it helps to set goals that are *specific* and *realistic*. For example, “I will talk to one new person a day” or “I will ask my neighbour over to coffee ” is more specific than “I need to talk to more people.” Being specific gives you tasks to shoot for and allows you to have a better idea of how much progress you are making toward your goals. Being realistic gives you a better chance of success; for instance, if you’re shy, setting the goals of making a large group of friends, going to every party you hear about, and not feeling nervous when approaching new people is probably unrealistic and can set you up for disappointment.
2. Build awareness of the reasons you don’t have the social network you would like so that you can target some specific strategies for building more support.
  1. If you’re socially anxious or shy, it can help to work on your social skills (see below), try some relaxation exercises (e.g., deep breathing, meditation, exercise) to address physiological symptoms of anxiety, get help and support from existing friends and acquaintances, build positive thoughts and talk, and create a reasonable plan for taking small risks at first to increase your social contact, then take slightly bigger risks as you get better at it.

2. If you're feeling down, schedule some social time each week, even if you don't feel like it, and make yourself follow through. Get a friend or relative to check in with you regularly. Ask a friend to help motivate you to get out more. Forcing yourself to be social but not overdoing it can help if you were feeling down.
3. If you're new to your neighbourhood and fairly social, a reasonable goal might be to attend two or three social events a week, join one club or religious/spiritual community, do some volunteering and/or work on getting to know two or three friends by inviting them to hang out a few times a week.

### Meeting New People

1. Take a class, join a club or organisation, where you may meet others with common interests.
2. Join a volunteer organisation—it's a good way to meet people, and helping others can also make you feel good.
3. Ask someone you'd like to get to know better to go for a walk or coffee with you.
4. Join a religious or spiritual community.
5. Try a mutual aid group.
6. Get to know people through supportive social media groups.
7. Leave your smartphone in your bag when you're out and around others—if you're staring at a screen, it's unlikely anyone will try to talk to you.



## Building Social Skills

1. Pay attention to your nonverbal communication style: Are you doing things that make you look approachable (e.g., smiling, making direct but not intense eye contact, angling your body and face toward others you are talking to, standing close but not too close—about 2 to 3 feet for friends and about 3 to 4 feet for acquaintances), unapproachable (e.g., scowling, looking down or to the side, having a stiff or “closed” body posture, standing far away from others), or intrusive (e.g., standing too close, staring intently, touching people you don’t know well or who appear uncomfortable with your touch)? Work on becoming more aware of the nonverbal messages you are sending and making them friendly and approachable.
2. Think of one or two “open questions” (questions that can’t be answered by just “yes” or “no”) that you can ask an acquaintance to get a conversation going (e.g., “how’s life with you?” “how are your family?” “have you got anything planned for the weekend?” “I’m looking for something new to watch on Netflix—what have you been watching lately?”)
3. Work on your listening skills—look at the person talking, nod or say “Mm hmm” to show you hear what they are saying and allow them to finish without interrupting. Ask follow-up questions to show interest in what they said.
4. If it’s tough for you to have conversations (maybe because of social anxiety), allow yourself to try starting a short conversation but then ending it before it gets too tough—for example, after talking a few minutes, say “It was great talking—I have to run now.”
5. Ask someone you trust to give you feedback on your social strengths and weaknesses so you know what to work on.

## Getting Closer to People You Know

1. Talk to one trustworthy person about your feelings.
2. Offer to listen to someone else’s problems, without jumping to advice (unless they are directly asking for advice).
3. Call, text, IM, or Skype someone you haven’t talked to in a while.
4. Do something nice for a friend or relative.
5. Invite a friend or acquaintance to lunch or coffee.
6. Ask someone to come over to watch Netflix, or invite them to a movie.

