

# *Nurturing healthy relationships*



It is not a far stretch to say that our close relationships are often the most treasured part of our lives. The kind of people we choose to spend time with, whether it is our friends, family, or particularly our partner, is a direct reflection of who we are, as we often associate with people who share our deep-held values and interests. At the same time, our relationships can also spark new growth and learning as we discover alternative ways of thinking and being. Given how important a role our relationships play in the development of our identities, it is crucial that we cultivate relationships that nurture our sense of well-being and our individuality while also helping us better ourselves at every stage in our lives. This newsletter will explore the idea of “healthy” relationships and how we can encourage such relationships in our lives.

## Why healthy relationships are important

The quality of our relationships can determine the state of our mental and physical well-being. It is believed that our closest loved ones can influence us to make healthier decisions as well as guide us through periods of stress and anxiety, while a lack of reliable social connections can stir up feelings of isolation and demoralization. According to Harvard Health Publishing, the following are some key benefits that relationships provide:

- Healthy relationships are associated with a sense of well-being and happiness.
- Fewer social connections are linked with depression and cognitive decline in old age.
- A stable, happy marriage can also grant a protective influence on the heart, possibly lowering the risk for heart attacks and strokes.
- According to a meta-analytic review conducted on about 148 different studies that looked at the type of social connections that people in the later ages had and the impact on their health, those with an “adequate” amount of social relationships have a 50% higher chance of survival and therefore live longer.



## What constitutes a “healthy” relationship?

For many of us, the concept of a “healthy” relationship, one that confers long-term emotional and physical satisfaction can be mystifying. While what constitutes a good relationship for someone might differ somewhat from person to person, the basic building blocks of a healthy relationship are usually the same. What is interesting is that these “building blocks” remain consistent across the most important relationships in our lives, including our family, children, partner, friends, and even co-workers. Therefore, no matter which relationship we choose to work on, the following key attributes of a nurturing relationship will prove most useful.

## Qualities of a nurturing relationship

### Mutual respect

Many of us understand that respect is the foundation that relationships are built on, but it can be difficult to grasp exactly what respect means. That is partly because respect encompasses almost everything critical to an enduring, fulfilling relationship. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, respect refers to “admiration felt or shown for someone...that you believe has good ideas or qualities” and it can also mean “politeness, honour, and care shown towards to someone”. A relationship built on mutual respect by definition involves fairness, kindness, reciprocity, and equality. It means that you value each other’s viewpoints, ideas, and dreams, and fully involve each other when making important life decisions.

### Open communication

Most of us can stand to improve how we communicate within our relationships. Having a look at our communication channels and whether they allow for easy, open, and honest flow of conversation and ideas can be a good start. It is essential that both individuals can express themselves fully, such as their appreciation for their partner or any pressing concerns, without reserve or fear of judgement. Equally important is being willing to listen to each other with patience and understanding, without jumping on the urge to be critical. Open communication, when practiced in a respectful manner, promotes trust and intimacy as well as aids in resolving conflicts peacefully, all of which are critical to preserving emotional bonds.

### Being able to be “you”

Our relationships are a part of our identity; however, they shouldn’t become our identity. The analogy of a tree may help visualize this idea. Think of yourself as the trunk of a tree while the branches reflect our relationships, our career, our passions and beliefs, and all the other parts that make us who we are. In an article published in Huffington Post, writer Jennifer Twardowski explains that at the end of the day, both partners should “know that they are responsible for their own individual happiness”. This means maintaining your individuality, interests, and relationships with other people, as well as allowing each other the space to be who you both are. This not only ensures that we possess several “sources of happiness” but that we each contribute to the relationship with our unique qualities.



Healthy relationships that survive for the long haul do require some work from both individuals involved, however, when the amount of effort that a relationship requires surpasses the joy it brings you, it might be time for you both to reflect on where things may be going wrong and consider what kind of changes can be made to strengthen the ties again. Certain relationships that are toxic and damaging to your well-being may even need to be severed. In such cases, it can be helpful to speak with a professional who can help identify issues and guide you towards forming more fulfilling, lasting relationships that enrich your life.

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