
Friendship and Support

Do you feel isolated and alone? Do you want more adult friendships? Although children are certainly important, they can't and shouldn't be expected to be a substitute for relationships with other adults. Everyone needs and benefits from having a circle of close friends. Having this support system:

- makes it easier to handle problems.
- provides a buffer against stress.
- leads to a more positive parenting experience.
- is a source of strength.



Children also benefit from a parent's support network. Parents tend to be more patient and loving with their children when their own emotional needs are met. Studies show one of the most important factors for effective single parenting is having a strong support network of friends. It takes energy and time to build relationships - but it's worth it!

Thinking about people you can turn to for help

Write down who provides the following types of support for you.

- Who provides emotional support, someone to talk to and share problems?
- Who helps you to handle stress?
- Who reminds you that you are cared for and valued?
- Whom do you talk to about specific needs such as where to get bargains for children's clothes, what doctor to choose, how to handle discipline, where to apply for food stamps?
- Who answers questions or gives suggestions about personal, legal, or medical concerns?
- Who can help with concrete support such as money, food, and clothing?
- Who can help with emergency assistance, transportation, or child care?

Do you have enough people supporting you?

The following exercise will help you think about the size of your group of friends.

- Write your name in the middle of a piece of paper and draw a circle around it.
- Next, write the names of people who provide emotional, financial, or other types of help to you. Place the names of people who provide the most support for you closer to your name on the paper. Include friends, family members, professionals, neighbors, and anyone else who provides support. You now know how many people make up your support network. You also know how strong your support network is by seeing how close your name is to the other names on the paper.

- Next draw lines between the names of the people on your paper who spend time together. This will help you see how connected your network is.

Most people have between 10 and 25 people in their group. How does your network of friends compare?

If your circle is too small, think about people you would like to get to know better. Think of places where you might meet interesting people.

If your network is too large, it may become difficult to stay connected. You may have too many demands on your time and energy. How might you reduce the size?

How are people in your network connected to you and each other? A tightly connected network may provide more support, but it may also have too much control over you. The group may expect you to do things their way. Can you add some new members? Can you introduce some members to each other? How can you change your support network to fit your needs?

Giving and receiving support is tied to positive family health and well being. As important as it is to be supported, it's just as important to support others. Is there anyone you support, or could support?

Ways to be a friend might be offering to watch a neighbor's children for a few hours, bringing dessert over to someone who might need an added lift, or calling someone on the phone to let them know you are thinking about them.

What do you do when you feel lonely?

Lonely feelings are natural. Still, being single doesn't mean you'll always feel lonely. There are many ways to cope with feelings of loneliness and help you adjust to your new role.

Look at the following list. What do you do when you feel lonely? Circle each item you use.

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1. listen to music | 15. watch television |
| 2. write | 16. get drunk or high |
| 3. work or study | 17. call a friend |
| 4. exercise | 18. talk to a health care provider or therapist |
| 5. walk | 19. visit someone |
| 6. work on a hobby | 20. volunteer to help others |
| 7. read | 21. go out and meet new people |
| 8. play a musical instrument | 22. call or visit an old friend |
| 9. cry | 23. join a club or organization |
| 10. sleep | 24. spend money |
| 11. sit and think | 25. go shopping |
| 12. do nothing | 26. go for a drive |
| 13. overeat | 27. interact with a pet |
| 14. take tranquilizers | |

First, look at the number of circles you drew around items 1-8. This shows how often you ease loneliness with useful activities you do alone. It's often hard to feel comfortable spending time alone. As a sense of security develops, single parents find that time alone can be a pleasure.

Now, look at your responses to items 9-16. This shows how often you deal with loneliness by doing very little that is positive. Be careful, this behavior can become destructive after awhile. If you're trying to forget or escape, you'll have a harder time getting over your loss. You may feel useless, depressed, or have physical problems. Turning away from the world and people can increase loneliness. There will be times when you will need to cry or sleep, but don't let this become routine.

Next, see how often you've circled items 17-23. This shows how often you deal with loneliness by becoming socially active. Keep in mind that looking for friends may not work as a strategy for coping with lonely feelings. We tend to make friends when we get involved in projects or ideas we care about. This is how we meet people with common interests and values. But don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. Offer your help to others as well.

Now look at your responses to items 24-27. This tells you how often you deal with loneliness by distracting yourself. Shopping or taking a drive won't get rid of loneliness for long. Yet once in awhile these activities can move us out away from destructive or passive activities, moving us into action so we feel better.

Making new friends

Sometimes it's hard to know where to meet new people when you have limited money, time and energy. Here are some ideas for making new friends.

- Join community activities and meet your neighbors.
- Plan dinner exchanges with friends. For low-cost entertainment, have a meal at your house, then rotate to homes of others in the group.
- Participate in PTA, or volunteer to be a group leader or chaperone at one of your children's activities or clubs.
- Form babysitting cooperatives. If you're short of money, trade babysitting time with other parents or exchange a service instead of money. It's important to spend time with adults once in awhile, without your children.
- Join a church or synagogue of your choice. You'll meet people with a similar philosophy or values and find activities for adults and children.
- Join a singles group, such as Parents Without Partners.
- Take classes, attend seminars or lectures.
- Work on a joint project with another adult or child.
- Start a new hobby or recreational activity.

Grandparents as support

Are there older adults involved with your family's life? Children benefit from encouragement and support from a variety of people who care for them. Grandparents provide another supportive adult in both children's and single parents' lives.

A grandparent figure doesn't have to be a blood relative. Your family can "adopt" an older adult as a grandparent - a neighbor, or a friend's relative. This involvement will enrich the life of the older adult, your children's live and your own.

Grandparents can provide:

- another adult who makes your child feel special.
- time and affection.
- someone to read with.
- great stories about the past.

- understanding about and perspective on life's challenges.
- a tie to another generation.

Sources:

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