



Cultivating Friendships to Support Mental Health

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When experiencing depression, anxiety, or other mental health concerns, it can be hard to reveal our experience to those we love. Having supportive friends can make a huge difference when we are struggling. However, friendships can be impacted in a variety of ways when people struggle with their mental health.

Some anticipate rejection and do not allow for openness and honesty in their friendships. Others may experience a self-stigma related to their mental health and may choose to isolate themselves from others. On the other hand, some people do not experience any impact on their friendships because of mental health challenges. Although it can be scary at times to disclose that we are struggling to our friends, social connection allows us to be witnessed by the people we care about and provides enjoyment and comfort in times of need.

Being Vulnerable

If you are struggling with a mental health concern, it is always up to you to decide how much you share with the important people in your life about what you are experiencing. You should never feel pressured to share more than you are comfortable. If you have close friends that you know will understand and can empathize with you, consider sharing with those friends. It is important to know that true connection requires authenticity and vulnerability. These two keys to connection require us to reveal the different layers of our personal experience including our emotions, hopes, dreams, beliefs, goals,

opinions, and more. Authenticity is about allowing others to peek into what is really occurring on the inside while vulnerability is having the courage to allow ourselves to be truly seen by others – flaws and all. Allowing people to experience things with you – even the hard things -- can invite people into your world and help you feel support and connection.

Taking Initiative

Friendships also provide us an opportunity for growth and learning. In every friendship, each person is responsible for their part. Rather than waiting for others to change or be a certain way so that we can be okay, it is important to take responsibility for our part. If you decide to tell your friend about your mental health experience, be patient if they do not understand your experience or how to support you right away. When people don't give you the response you want, stay open and curious. A couple questions you may want to ask yourself when feeling frustrated or disappointed with your friends are:

- "What opportunities for growth are arising through this relationship for me?"
- "How could I choose to do something differently with this friend?"
- "How can I be kind to myself and to my friend despite these feelings?"

It is also helpful to take initiative when it comes to maintaining your friendships. If you want to start a friendship, or rekindle an old one, don't wait for the other person to reach out to you.

Making New Friends

Meeting new people can be hard, especially on the heels of a pandemic. However, allowing yourself to open up and putting yourself in situations where you are able to meet

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new people can help you cultivate a team of support during trying times. Building friendship around shared commonalities is always a good place to start when trying to meet new people. Once you identify a passion or a hobby, it will be easier to find a group of friends to create a network of support, whether through a book club, a yoga class, an art class or hiking group, for example.

Creating friendships and connecting with others isn't always easy. It's important to remember that not everyone is meant to be a friend for you, and that is okay. Each friend you meet makes a mark on your life, no matter how small. As human beings who are wired for connection, friends are critical in our lives – especially when we are going through a rough time.

References:

<https://mailchi.mp/teentcsv/cultivating-healthy-friendships-to-support-mental-health?e=65b3e08339>

