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Product of Your Surroundings: The Act of Fostering Healthy Relationships

Understanding Healthy Relationships



We have all heard or learned about how humans are social creatures. Who we interact with, what we do with people, talking to people, all of this goes into most of what our daily lives consist of. But this does not mean we only derive joy and fulfillment from our social lives. Since our social lives have such a strong impact on who we are as people and how we grow and develop, when we dive into toxic and unhealthy relationships, it can take a drastic toll on our character and lives.

In this month's newsletter, we will be looking into what makes up a healthy relationship, what it looks like, as well as the flip side about toxic and unhealthy relationships. While many of our readers are teens and young adults, this can be a universal topic to everyone, since we go through our entire lives interacting with others to varying degrees of benefit and consequence. Knowing how to foster healthy and happy relationships can offer many benefits in life, but also knowing how to avoid and get out of unhealthy and draining relationships can offer the same level of benefit. Developing skills for how to foster these relationships is critical for anyone and deeply consider applying these tips in your life to any capacity.

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What Makes Relationships Healthy vs. Unhealthy?

There are general definitions of what to look for in a healthy relationship such as someone bringing genuine positivity into your life or being there for you when times are tough. On the flip side, there are general definitions for what an unhealthy relationship might look like, exhibiting things opposite to that of healthy relationships, such as bringing negativity into your life or not being there for you in tough times. But this is a very surface level understanding of what these definitions might look like in our lives.

Nuances between people and their relationships can also include individual needs from relationships unique to that person. Needs and priorities change in our life constantly, but generally being fulfilled by someone in your life is the sign of a healthy relationship. There should be a balanced power dynamic, nobody should feel unnecessarily dominant or in control of the other. Things like trust and empathy are all crucial elements of a healthy relationship, especially when you can gauge those to what each other needs at different stages or places in life.

Feeling fulfilled and actually being fulfilled are different things, although most of the time they do overlap. When they do not overlap, you can begin to see unhealthy relationships develop when someone is being manipulated by someone else, making them feel like they are supported and fulfilled by their partner, friend, or family member, but are, in reality, being taken advantage of. This is commonly discussed in relationships between partners but can be equally as common in relationships between friends. When friends expect you to be there for them but they are not there for you in return, when they make you feel worse about yourself and expect you to change things about yourself because of what they say, these are signs of a friend taking advantage of you, signs of an unhealthy relationship.

Think about your own life. Have you ever felt like one of your friends took advantage of your friendship? Perhaps they needed something from you but did not give it back when you needed it? How did it make you feel? These are questions that are important to ask ourselves in our social lives.

What Can You Do About an Unhealthy Relationship or Friendship?



It can greatly depend on what makes your friendship or relationship unhealthy when deciding what you can do about it, but there are many things you can think about when figuring out what to do. You should first evaluate what it is about the relationship that is bothering you. You should consider any possible problems you might be having as you are going down different possible courses of action. We learn important lessons from Steven Hayes, the leading mind behind one of psychology's most popular forms of therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT[1]. Through ACT, we work on difficult emotions and situations in our life, part of which includes working with values exploration.

When dealing with any major changes in your life, it is crucial to understand what you value and hold most dearest to yourself. When it comes to interpersonal connections in general, what do you value most? Do you value communication? Honesty? Feelings of empathy and compassion? There are lots of things that go into interpersonal connections and understanding what is most important to you is a great first step in assessing what kinds of changes you want to make with those connections.

Think of the things you value, then look at the connections you have in your life. Think about a few things. Do you feel like those needs and values are fulfilled? What values are fulfilled in your interpersonal connections? Which ones are not? Thinking about our lives as a whole from the lens of what we value helps to center us in the things and people we hope to surround ourselves with.

Confronting an unhealthy relationship is never easy, especially if it's someone that you have known for a long time. Open communication is the most direct and effective way to confront an unhealthy relationship but it is not the only way to go about confronting it. Depending on what makes the relationship hurtful, you might feel more comfortable or feel that it would be more appropriate to

[1] Rezendevknowfully.com. (2026, February 11). *Acceptance and commitment therapy (act) interview with Steven Hayes*. Psychotherapy.net. https://www.psychotherapy.net/perspectives/articles/steven-hayes-on-acceptance-and-commitment-therapy-act/

take another approach. While assertive and open communication should be your first option, it can be scary to confront a friend, family member, or partner. Sometimes the relationship is unhealthy in that you feel like you can't have those kinds of conversations freely and healthily.

Being able to slowly phase out and distance yourself from this person or those people can be a safer alternative if this relationship is one that makes you feel manipulated, taken advantage of, or generally not safe. Cutting off communication, distancing yourself, whether abruptly or over time, can be an easier way to phase out an unhealthy relationship in a non-confrontational way. Some things to keep in mind while doing this is that you might be confronted by the other person if they notice it and feel hurt by it. If you choose to take this non-confrontational approach, be prepared for a possible conversation with that person if it comes up. It is healthy to learn how to have difficult conversations with people. A way to practice having those while not being confrontational about distancing yourself from someone is by preparing what you might say if they do reach out or confront you about it.



Putting Together Your Environment

Who you surround yourself with has a major impact on your own livelihood. More important than who you surround yourself with is your relationship with yourself. As they say, you can tell a lot about how a person feels about themselves based on who they surround themselves with. Having a positive relationship with yourself is a great start to attracting better people for you who make you feel happy and supported. At the same time, having good people around you can help you build a better relationship with yourself. And there are lots of ways you can find those people who are right for you.

Find like-minded people in spaces of shared or desired interests. You can find friends or partners through many ways, one common way is connecting over shared or desired interests. It can feel good to share things you enjoy with others who enjoy the same things. Attending clubs, going to events, anything to put yourself in spaces surrounded by like-minded people. It can also feel good to put yourself out there and try things you want to try for the first time. Finding people in these spaces can show an instant impact of being supportive and encouraging of you trying new things. You build a sense of comfort and support with those people and you've found people who push you to grow and challenge yourself.

Assess and assert your values in what you need from your relationships. Come back to the values work we talked about before. Assess your friends, family members, or partner that you have in your life. Do they give you the things you are looking for in those relationships? Are there things they don't give you that you're willing to compromise on? Equally as important, are you giving them what they need in the relationship in return? Any healthy relationship is a two way street. Open dialogue about your relationship with someone builds a foundation of trust and honesty, as well as giving you the chance to learn about yourself and the other person in what you both value.

Develop healthy connections while letting go of unhealthy connections. People who make you a better person are people who deserve more of your time and energy. At the same time, those who take away from you being the person you want to be are not connections that you need to invest more time and energy in. You owe it to yourself to invest more in good people! As we discussed earlier, there are ways to handle unhealthy relationships tailored to what is unhealthy about it and what you are comfortable with doing. Investing in positive and healthy relationships will improve your quality of life in the short and long term. This means putting time and effort forward to good people that can mutually build a better environment for both of you.

When working through a complicated web of relationships, assessing how healthy or unhealthy they might be, commit to the belief that you deserve good things and good people in your life. At the same time, to bring good things and good people for yourself, it takes the investment in those people with your time and energy to foster good relationships. Fostering good relationships or letting go of harmful ones can be very difficult. If you have a difficult time doing either of these, always know that you deserve those good things and good people. Building that confidence in yourself will bring those people to your life. It rings true that your relationship with yourself is reflected by those that you surround yourself with.

Additional Resources

Bilodeau, K. (2021, July 1). *Fostering healthy relationships*. Harvard Health. https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/fostering-healthy-relationships

Abrusci, L. (2020, July 8). *Letting go of toxic relationships*. Steeped In Hope. https://steepedinhope.com/blog/toxic-relationships

A guide to values in act - dr. Jenny Shields. (n.d.). https://drjennyshields.com/act-values-guide/