POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Did you know that positive relationships are good for your health? The need to form close relationships with others is very much a part of our humanity. Humans need companionship. We thrive on a sense of belonging and need to experience affection. We need to feel that we are a part of something – that we belong and are accepted for who we are. We look to those closest to us for emotional support.

Research suggests that people with strong friendships or those in a committed romantic relationship cope better with stress. Data captured in a number of studies suggests that the connections we make with other people are just as important for one's health as eating a balanced diet, getting adequate sleep, exercising and not smoking.

People who form positive, strong and lasting connections with family, friends and people from their communities are also believed to live longer. Those without good relationship ties may experience feelings of loneliness, which can lead to sadness, depression and even mental health decline in later years.

What is a positive relationship?

A healthy relationship is any relationship between two people who love and support each other. The relationship may be platonic or romantic. The two people respect, trust and value each other and are able to communicate openly, even on difficult topics. In a healthy relationship, one party accepts the other for who he or she is. Both friends and lovers make time to see one another and shared interests are often part of the relationship. Research suggests that people with strong positive relationships are happier.

Just as positive relationships are good for your health and happiness, a stressful or toxic relationship can have a negative impact on your health. High levels of stress can weaken your immune system and make you more susceptible to illness. You may also experience digestive upsets, feelings of anxiety and have trouble sleeping.

Relationships and your health

Positive relationships can benefit your health in the following positive ways:

- **You have a good self-image and a sense of purpose**
  A positive relationship can improve your self-image and confidence and help you feel better about yourself. If you are looking out for someone, and someone is looking out for you, your life will have meaning and purpose. If you need to make changes in your life or try something new, a close confidant can support you through the process.

- **You experience less stress and/or cope better in stressful periods**
  According to a number of research studies, having a strong partner in a committed relationship – someone who provides understanding and support - can be a great shield against stress. Studies have also revealed that partners in committed relationships have reduced cortisol levels, the stress hormone that increases blood pressure and supresses the functions of the digestive, immune and/or reproductive systems. With better control of stress, you can look forward to a happier and longer life.

- **You make healthier lifestyle choices**
  Loved ones are more likely to encourage you to live a health life. For example, a new father may decide to stop smoking for the benefit of his new baby. Couples can also encourage each other to make healthy choices like losing weight or starting an exercise programme together.

- **If you're ill, you'll likely heal faster**
  Research conducted on patients who had heart surgery revealed that married people were more likely to survive two

years after the operation than those who were divorced, separated or widowed. With the physical and emotional support of a loved one, people tend to recuperate more quickly after illness than those who convalesce on their own.

- **You'll cope better emotionally during difficult times**
  If you are going through a difficult time, having a partner or friend to turn to for advice, guidance and support can help you to cope and make better choices. A simple note of encouragement or a phone call to let the person know you care can make all the difference to someone going through a difficult patch.

- **You'll likely be a better team player**
  Forging, nurturing and maintaining human relationships takes time and effort and is a skill that we need to learn from childhood. The stronger your close interpersonal relationships are, the better you are likely to collaborate with others in a working environment.

Resources:
- https://www.realsimple.com
- http://www.mayoclinic.org
- http://www.nmbreakthroughs.org
- https://betterdoctor.com
- http://jamanetwork.com

Ways to improve your relationships

- Keep in contact on a regularly basis. An SMS or Whatsapp to say hello and ask how things are going can brighten your friend's day.

- If your friend is going through a tough time, be willing to step in and help. Friendship is a two-way street. Lend a listening ear.

- Communicate with your friends. If you are going through a bad patch don't shut the door on your friends, instead share your feelings and accept their support and care.

- Don't take advantage of friends. If you go out, be willing to pay your share or alternate who pays. Don't only call up your friends when you need a favour.

- Show respect for your partner in a romantic relationship.

- Show your love through physical affection – hold hands, hug and kiss your partner often.

- Show your partner that you value his or her viewpoints – ask advice on difficult issues.

- Remember birthdays and anniversaries.

- Don't break a friend's (or your spouse's) trust. If a friend shares something with you in confidence, keep it to yourself.

"The need to feel loved is a primary human emotional need." Dr Gary Chapman, author, speak and counsellor

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