

Manage stress:

Strengthen your support network



Stress is a normal and unavoidable part of life — but too much stress can affect your emotional and physical wellbeing. According to APA's 2015 Stress in America survey¹, average stress levels today are slightly higher than they were in 2014. On a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is "a great deal of stress" and one is "little or no stress," American adults rated their stress level at a 5.1 today, up from 4.9 in 2014. But worryingly, a significantly greater percentage of adults reported experiencing a stress level of 8 or higher on the 10-point scale. Twenty-four percent of American adults reported this extreme level of stress in 2015, up from 18 percent the previous year.

Emotional support is an important protective factor for dealing with life's difficulties. The 2015 survey found the average stress level for those with emotional support was 5.0 out of 10, compared to 6.3 for those without such support.

Loneliness has been associated with a wide variety of health problems including high blood pressure, diminished immunity, cardiovascular disease and cognitive decline.² In fact, low levels of social support have even been linked to increased risk of death from cardiovascular disease, infectious diseases and cancer.³

The good news is that there are ways to seek out such support, and to nurture your supportive relationships.

The benefits of social support

As important as social support is, many Americans don't feel they have access to this valuable resource. When asked if there is someone they can ask for emotional support, such as talking over problems or helping make difficult decisions, 70 percent said yes. However, more than half (55 percent) also said they could have used at least a little more emotional support.

In fact, experts say, almost all of us benefit from social and emotional support. And though it may seem counterintuitive, having strong social support can actually make you more able to cope with problems on your own, by improving your self-esteem and sense of autonomy.

You don't need a huge network of friends and family to benefit from social support, however. Some people find camaraderie among just a handful of people, be they co-workers, neighbors or friends from their church or religious institution, for instance.

Yet social skills don't always come naturally. Some people have trouble making social connections. Many others lose established connections due to life changes such as retirement, relocation or the death of a loved one. In any case, it's possible to forge new connections to reap the benefits of a healthy support network.

Grow your support network

Cast a wide net. When it comes to your social supports, one size doesn't fit all. You may not have someone you can confide in about everything — and that's okay. Maybe you have a colleague you can talk to about problems at work, and a neighbor who lends an ear when you have difficulties with your kids. Look to different relationships for different kinds of support. But remember to look to people you can trust and count on, to avoid disappointing, negative interactions that can make you feel worse.

Be proactive. Often people expect others to reach out to them, and then feel rejected when people don't go out of their way to do so. To get the most out of your social relationships, you have to make an effort. Make time for friends and family. Reach out to lend a hand or just say hello. If you're there for others, they'll be more likely to be there for you. And in fact, when it comes to longevity, research suggests that providing social support to friends and family may be even more important than receiving it.⁴

Take advantage of technology. It's nice to sit down with a friend face-to-face, but it isn't always possible. Luckily, technology makes it easier than ever before to stay connected with loved ones far away. Write an email, send a text message or make a date for a video chat. Don't rely too heavily on digital connections, however. Some research suggests that face-to-face interactions are most beneficial.

Follow your interests. Do you like to hike, sing, make jewelry, play tennis, get involved in local politics? You're more likely to connect with people who like the things you like. Join a club, sign up for a class or take on a volunteer position that will allow you to meet others who share your interests. Don't be discouraged if you don't make friends overnight. Try to enjoy the experience as you get to know others over time.

Seek out peer support. If you're dealing with a specific stressful situation — such as caring for a family member or dealing with a chronic illness — you may not find the support you need from your current network. Consider joining a support group to meet others who are dealing with similar challenges.

Improve your social skills. If you feel awkward in social situations and just don't know what to say, try asking simple questions about the other person to get the ball rolling. If you're shy, it can be less intimidating to get to know others over shared activities — such as a bike ride or a knitting class — rather than just hanging out and talking. If you feel particularly anxious in social situations, consider talking to a therapist with experience in social anxiety and social-skills training.

Ask for help. If you lack a strong support network and aren't sure where to start, there are resources you can turn to. Places of worship, senior and community centers, local libraries, refugee and immigrant groups, neighborhood health clinics and local branches of national organizations such as Catholic Charities or the YMCA/YWCA may be able to help you identify services, support groups and other programs in your community.

Seek professional help

If you're feeling stressed and don't have anyone to rely on, psychologists can help. As experts in human behavior, psychologists can help you develop strategies to manage stress and improve your social skills. Use the APA's [Psychologist Locator Service](#) to find a psychologist in your area. You can also visit www.mentalhealth.gov, a website of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services that offers resources in English and Spanish.

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¹ For full survey results and methodology, please visit stressinamerica.org.

²Masi, C.M., Chen, H., Hawkey, L.C., and Cacioppo, J.T. (2011). A meta-analysis of interventions to reduce loneliness. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15(3), 219-266.

³Uchino, B.N. Understanding the links between social support and physical health. (2009). *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 4(3), 236-255.

⁴Brown, S.L., Nesse, R.M. Vinokur, A.D., and Smith, D.M. (2003). Providing social support may be more beneficial than receiving it: Results from a prospective study of mortality. *Psychological Science* 14(4), 320-327.

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