

Tips to Strengthen Relationships Today

Jennifer Viveros and Dr. David Schramm

Research conducted by Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007) shows that happier people tend to have larger circles of friends, experience strong social support, and are more likely to be a support for others. But this research also shows that the connection between happiness and relationships goes both directions: happy people tend to have positive social relationships, and positive social relationships tend to make people happier. That means that striving to improve your relationships will, in turn, increase your level of happiness. As you feel happier, you will attract higher-quality relationships, and the upward spiral toward positive outcomes will continue. Either way, having strong, supportive relationships helps during times of stress, anxiety, worry, heartache, and need (Lyubomirsky, 2007). In fact, people who have a strong social support network are healthier and live longer (Verbrugge, 1979).

This fact sheet outlines several tips you can apply today to start developing and strengthening your close romantic and nonromantic relationships.

Turn Outward and Focus on Others

It is quite natural to get caught up in focusing on yourself and on your own personal challenges. However, this preoccupation with self does not yield itself to healthy, happy relationships. Although it takes effort, learning to turn outward and focus on others and their needs can be very beneficial. The following principles and practices from Dr. Lyubomirsky (2007) may be helpful in the pursuit to shift your focus outside of yourself.

- **Make time** – The one thing that most people have the least of is time. But setting aside meaningful time together is an important step for nurturing social relationships. A few minutes each day staying in touch makes all the difference. If needed, you could implement a “no electronics” time during the day so you can focus on each other.
- **Express admiration, appreciation, and affection** – Spend a few minutes every day giving affection and expressing gratitude to those closest to you for specific actions and/or words. Phrases such as “I noticed” or “I appreciate” keep relationships strong. Research shows that happy relationships have five times more positivity than negativity (Gottman & Silver, 2015). Make goals to raise your positive-to-negative ratio.
- **Capitalize on good fortune** – Take delight in the successes of the people around you. This has been shown to distinguish good relationships from poor ones. Celebrate and congratulate others when they do well in life. Be genuinely happy for them and find joy in their joys. Relive their good news or happy moments with them.
- **Share an “Inner Life”** – Cultivating shared rituals, dreams, and goals allows you to connect with others. Even if you do not share the same goals, showing respect for the other person and their goals still yields connection. Each week, try to do at least one thing that supports another person’s roles, hopes, and dreams. This could be anything from a supportive text message to

babysitting while someone works on a project (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p.146).

- **Be supportive and loyal** – Find ways to help others. Encourage them as they seek to fulfill their responsibilities and achieve their goals. Earn their trust by never talking bad about them when they are not around and not disclosing information to others that they asked you to keep confidential.

As you shift your focus from yourself to others, you will find that your relationships with others will improve. These benefits are not only applicable in your relationship with your spouse or lover, but also the other significant family and friend relationships in your life (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Becoming Your Best

Sometimes it can get discouraging when romantic, social, and family relationships are not how you would like them to be. This may cause you to feel less than hopeful about the future. This feeling does not have to be permanent though. The following steps (Greater Good, 2017) outline how to focus on what you have the ability to do in order to strengthen your relationships:

1. Imagine your life in the future, especially when it comes to your relationships. Think of how your romantic, social, and family relationships will be, under ideal circumstances. Resist the temptation to get caught up in the hurt and disappointment that your relationships are causing now, or did in the past.
2. Spend some time writing about what you imagined your relationships will look like. Include specific details.
3. As you reflect on what you want from your various relationships, think about what *you* can do to improve these relationships so they will become more like your ideal. Develop some personal goals to work on.

Studies have found that following these steps often results in an improved mood and a feeling of balance and control in one's relationships (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). In addition, taking the time to write helps you to organize your thoughts and learn about yourself. The understanding that writing brings helps you to feel a sense of control over your

life and increased confidence to reach your goals (Lyubomirsky, 2007). As your optimism for the future increases, so will your motivation to make the necessary changes to create a future similar to what you have imagined.

Forgiving

When someone hurts you, it can be hard to keep yourself from responding negatively. It can be fulfilling in the moment to lash out or treat the person badly. However, that momentary pleasure does not last very long before it turns into guilt and remorse. The only way to really feel peace with the situation and the person who has hurt you is to forgive. Doing so opens the door for a strong relationship and lasting joy.

Forgiveness involves overcoming your desires for avoidance and/or revenge, and replacing them with more positive or kind attitudes, feelings, and behaviors (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Choosing to forgive allows you to let go of the hurt and move on. Refusing to forgive can actually be harmful for you, increasing the likelihood that you will be "hateful, depressed, hostile, anxious, angry, and neurotic" (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p.172). Knowing that forgiving is the right thing to do certainly does not make it easy though.

Forgiving does not mean that your relationship with the person who has hurt you will return to what it was prior, or that you are excusing the behavior. However, it does mean to try to let go of the hurt and see the offender more kindly (Lyubomirsky, 2007). It is important to point out here that every situation is different and safety should always be a priority, especially in cases of abuse and neglect. Here are four ideas (Lyubomirsky, 2007) that might help make forgiving a little easier:

- **Appreciate being forgiven** – Recall a time that you did harm to another person. Think about how it felt when they communicated their forgiveness to you. Consider the benefits that came from their extending forgiveness to you. If appropriate, you may want to ask forgiveness of someone you have wronged. Recognizing the mercy that has been shown to you can help you to forgive others and be more empathetic toward their weaknesses.

- **Imagine forgiving** – Imagine empathizing with the offender and granting him or her forgiveness. Mentally walking through the situation may make it easier when the time comes to actually forgive the person who has wronged you. Cultivating forgiving thoughts toward this person and others who have wronged you has been found to decrease the physiological manifestations of stress and provide a greater sense of control.
- **Write a letter of forgiveness** – Write a letter to an individual who has wronged you. Describe in detail what happened, how you were hurt by it, and how it continues to affect you. State what you wish had happened instead. End by conveying your forgiveness and understanding. The purpose of this strategy is not to actually send the letter, but to help you come to terms with the situation and to be able to clearly express your feelings and forgiveness when you speak with the offender in person. Talking to yourself in the mirror about the situation and your feelings may also be helpful.
- **Read inspiring stories of forgiveness** – Read the stories of public figures who are known for forgiving. Some examples to get you started are Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela.

It can take time to make forgiveness a habit. If you feel yourself slipping back into feeling hurt by the wrongs that you have already forgiven, remind yourself why you have chosen to forgive (Lyubomirsky, 2007). As you seek to forgive others, and seek forgiveness for the wrongs that you have committed, you invite healing into your relationships.

Serving

Research continues to show that serving others has many benefits. There are obvious benefits for the recipient of the service, but there are also significant benefits that come from performing acts of kindness. Serving leads us to perceive others in a more positive light, have a more positive view of ourselves, and let go of guilt, distress, and discomfort. It also increases our awareness of our own good fortune. However, perhaps the most

important benefit is connecting with others (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

As you are seeking opportunities to perform acts of kindness, keep these principles (Lyubomirsky, 2007) in mind:

- **Make it a choice** – Voluntary giving leads to more happiness than forced or involuntary giving.
- **Change it up** – Choose new people to serve or find new acts of kindness to perform for those you normally serve, in order to keep from getting stuck in a rut.
- **Make a connection** – Use serving as an opportunity to strengthen your relationships with those around you.
- **Make an impact** – Try to recognize the concrete impacts your service is making on others, not so you can boast, but so you can feel good about your efforts.
- **Pay it forward** – Start a chain reaction. Invite others to find opportunities to perform acts of kindness as well.

Performing acts of kindness is especially good at boosting your happiness when you make an effort to do more than what you are accustomed to doing (i.e., more per day, more significant acts), thus keeping your service fresh and meaningful. Each person's way of serving will be unique so figure out what works for you. You do not need to look far or try to do complicated services. Start doing simple acts of kindness for your own family and friends. (Lyubomirsky, 2007). As you choose to serve others, especially those you are close to, your relationships will grow.

Conclusion

Strong, healthy relationships have many benefits, but there is always room for improvement. Choosing strategies aimed at improving the relationships you value and believe you will enjoy will empower you and make you feel happier (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Then, as you turn outward and focus on others, become your best self, forgive, and serve, your relationships with others will become even better than they are now. What you choose to do today in this regard will make all the difference.

References

- Gottman, J. M. & Silver, N. (2015). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Harmony Books.
- Greater Good in Action. (2017). *Best possible self for relationships*. Retrieved from https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/best_possible_self_for_relationships
- Lyubomirsky, S. (2007). *How of Happiness*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- Sheldon, K. M., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2006). How to increase and sustain positive emotion: The effects of expressing gratitude and visualizing best possible selves. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 1*(2), 73-82.
- Verbrugge, L. M. (1979). Marital status and health. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 41*:267-85.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions. Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities. This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Ken White, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University. (4-2018)