

S is for Social Connection

Social connection means generally feeling connected to people. This is one of the '7 Steps to Wellbeing' in Mindful Mermaids because scientific evidence shows it's a core human need; one that's essential for us to feel satisfied.

Our relationships are really important for keeping us happy and healthy. Lockdown highlighted just how important this is. Connecting with the people around us is a great way to remind ourselves that we're important and valued by others.

There may be a whole raft of reasons as to why social connection is personally important to you. Maybe you are feeling isolated due to retirement, being a homeworker or other circumstances. Perhaps you just need a support network.

Sometimes in life we grow out of an old lifestyle choice, such as drinking in pubs and are then in need of new friendships, around other activities.

There are many benefits to social connection and one that is particularly important for our wellbeing is giving to others. This can be through smiles, listening and sharing. Learning will naturally occur when we listen and we can learn so much from other people.

Research shows that smiling releases endorphins and we may smile more when we are with other people. Science also shows that when we socially connect, the pleasure-inducing hormone oxytocin is released, which reduces anxiety and improves concentration. In addition to this, our cardiovascular and immune systems are given a boost, helping us to function better.

Social connection in relation to exercise can generate a sense of camaraderie, because everyone is there for the same purpose. If you attend something regularly the people you see may become like family and this can increase a sense of accountability. For most of us it's a challenge to be consistent with exercise but being part of a group provides the motivation and accountability to keep going. Research suggests people enjoy exercise more with others than when they are alone.

Here are some suggestions for increasing social connection:

- Arrange a day out with friends you haven't seen for a while.
- Arrange to meet people regularly, e.g. try monthly dinner dates with friends or joining a local interest group.
- Ask how someone's weekend was and really listen to their reply.
- Connect with consoles – online video games let you hang out, chat and have fun with friends.
- Build strong relationships with your kids.
- Explore the app store – mobile games like 'Heads Up' or 'Words with Friends' are great for getting people together.

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- Face to face technology– video chats can be a great way to feel more connected; apps like Skype and FaceTime are a great way of staying in touch with friends and family, particularly if you live far apart.
- Find your crowd – use social media to find positive online communities that share your passions.
- Get active and share good habits with family and friends.
- Give a colleague a lift to work or share the journey home with them.
- Google 'befriending services' if you are feeling lonely and isolated.
- Have lunch with a colleague, friend or relative.
- If you're a family caregiver, ask for help from others.
- Join a book club, new exercise class or take up a new hobby to meet like-minded people.
- Keep the convo going – plan with a friend to watch the same movie or tv series so you can chat about it afterwards.
- Make a list of people you care about and reach out: don't wait for others to initiate contact.
- Make the effort to phone people – it's all too easy get into the habit of only texting, messaging or emailing people and sometimes it can be helpful to hear someone's voice.
- Prioritise social connections in your schedule; set time each week on your calendar to connect with people you care about whether personally or electronically.
- Put five minutes aside to find out how someone really is.
- Put it in the post – write a postcard or letter to surprise someone you care about.
- Put up pictures – having favourite photos of your friends and family can be a great reminder of the connections in your life.
- Reach out to somebody you've lost contact with; send them a letter/ message or give them a call to let them know you are thinking about them.
- Remember the “little things”; sending a quick birthday/ congratulations for a happy event, or a condolence for a loss, lets people know that you care about them.
- Roll the dice – board games can be a great way to connect with family and you can play online versions with far away friends too.
- Share your feelings – take time to talk about the important stuff with your family and friends.
- Speak regularly to immediate or extended family; these are people who in some ways know you best and often will help you in challenging times.
- Speak to someone new; try to take opportunities to talk to people you don't know, e.g. when out walking or in the supermarket.
- Spend time developing and nurturing relationships with friends, family, neighbours and colleagues; think about who you want to get to know better and ask them if they would like to meet up.
- Start a project – making something together can build bonds with a sibling, parent or friend e.g. building, baking or blogging!

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- Switch off the TV/ technology and play a game with the children or just talk.
- Say “yes” more often: Participate in social events (even the online ones) or activities that interest you.
- Take a class to learn something new.
- Take a moment to say hello and talk to people as you go through your day—the woman who serves you coffee, the cashier at a shop, your colleague or co-worker.
- Take a trip down memory lane – look through old photo albums with your family.
- Take time each day to be with your family; if possible you could set up a fixed "family time" each day.
- Travel to different places and meet new people.
- Try to arrange to meet up with someone in person instead of sending an email.
- Use online messaging – message a friend or start a group chat.
- Visit a friend, family member or neighbour who needs support/ company.
- Volunteer at a local school, community garden, hospital, school, community group, place of worship, charity shop etc

The FORD-method

If you are someone who doesn't find meeting new people or being in different social situations easy the FORD method may be useful to keep in mind.

FORD is an acronym that stands for family, occupation, recreation, dreams. By asking questions related to these subjects, you can master small talk in many social settings. It's an easy-to-remember system that helps with rapport building and small talk. For more information click on the following link:

<https://tinyurl.com/ymyhkv48>

Action plan for increasing social connection

If you would like to increase your opportunities to socially connect complete the following to boost your motivation and commitment. To do this you can choose something really simple such as messaging family or friends.

My goal is...

Example: to check how my friend is once a week.

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Now on to action planning; it is important to include the following in any action plan:

What action(s) you are going to take

How much you are going to do

When you are going to take action

How many days a week/ month you plan to take action

Example: This week I will message my friend (WHAT) x 1 (HOW MUCH) before I have breakfast (WHEN) on Saturday (HOW MANY DAYS)

Complete the following:

This week I will...

----- (WHAT)

----- (HOW MUCH)

----- (WHEN)

----- (HOW MANY DAYS)

How committed and motivated are you to this action plan on a scale from 0-10 (10 being the highest)?

What would increase your motivation and commitment? How can you use this to help yourself?