Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Building and maintaining a social support network

To live a happy, healthy life, most people need and enjoy the support of family and friends—your "social support network." Different people in your network satisfy different needs. Usually their contributions fall into one of four categories:



Advice or information
Material help
Emotional support
Companionship

The people you care about and spend time with don't have to hold beliefs identical to yours; people often "agree to disagree" or compromise. But positive, nurturing groups usually promote and support caring, communication and stress management.

Members of such a group:

Show concern for someone when he or she is upset.
Let others know how much they are appreciated.
Work together to handle stress in a relaxed and constructive way.

Building a social support network

Perhaps you're new in town or have just started a new job and do not have a support network. Here are some suggestions to help you reach out:

- Give the gift of time and attention. Everyone appreciates a friendly ear.
- Plan special meals. Invite neighbours or co-workers who live alone.
- Join a club or activity group to become connected with a group of individuals with common interests (dog walking, jogging, films, games or other hobbies).
- Become a volunteer for an organization in need.

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Be a good friend

Being a good friend is important both within the family circle and outside the home. If you treat someone well, you're more likely to be treated well in return. Here are eight simple guidelines a good friend should observe:

1. **Keep your word**, even about things that seem unimportant. What is trivial to you may mean a lot to someone else.

2. **Allow others to shine.** When it's someone else's turn in the spotlight, stand up and cheer, but don't butt in.

3. **Really listen when your friends speak.** Try to give them what they need, whether it's advice, help or comfort. When the roles are reversed and you have requested their help—listen to what they say.

4. **Be honest, but show tact.** Offer constructive criticism only when you are asked.

5. **Let others have the last word.** Maybe you can top their story, but save it for another time.

6. **Limit gripes and gossip.** Always try to end on an upbeat note.

7. **Don't make jokes at the expense of others—**even if they aren't part of your group.

8. **Don't keep score about who owes whom the most favours.** A good friend enjoys helping just for the sake of being helpful.

Giving feedback

Often people will choose not to say what's on their mind for fear of hurting or angering the people they care about. Being able to give feedback is a skill that can be learned and practiced, and will improve your relationships.

If you are feeling bothered or hurt by the actions of someone close to you, try not to criticize directly, but let them know how their actions are making you feel. Being personally attacked closes off communication. By taking ownership of how we are feeling, communication will remain open and problems can be addressed. Even if your friend does not act on the information you've given them, you can feel better, having got these feelings out in the open.

There may be times when you need to ask for help to repair or improve a troubled relationship. Like anything else, establishing healthy relationships requires work. It also calls for decided action. Even with the best of intentions, it's sometimes tempting just to let things run their course. The key to a strong supportive network lies in the quality of your personal relationships. And the key to successful relationships lies in taking charge.