Friend therapy

From childhood to old age, friends play a monumental role in our lives ─ and our health. Friendships help lower our blood pressure, maintain hormone function, bolster our immune systems, reduce inflammation, sustain cognitive function as we age and even help us live longer. Studies have shown that not having good friends is as bad for our long-term physical health as both obesity and smoking!

Friends are also essential to our mental health. They boost our self-confidence and self-esteem while helping us deal with everyday problems and traumatic events. Most of all, good friends make life more fun.

Talking things out

Talking to someone about how we're feeling or what's going on in our lives helps us clarify issues and gain different perspectives on situations. Mental health professionals have used "talk therapy" for decades to manage and overcome mental health issues or difficult life events. Psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors are invaluable resources when we're facing tough situations, feeling overwhelmed or dealing with a mental illness. But in our daily lives, close friends offer another level of support that involves affection and shared experiences. Friends know our history, our strengths and weaknesses, our goals and our dreams. While not being professional therapists, they can be greatly therapeutic!

Technology has provided us with new kinds of friendships that can be just as beneficial – online relationships. These can also be a source of emotional support, advice and connection, especially for people with mobility issues or those living far away from family and long-time friends. The online world of social media, special interest sites and discussion groups allows us to connect with like-minded people anywhere and at any time.

How to be a good friend

If we want good friends, we have to be a good friend. There are certain characteristics that are essential in forging and cultivating any close, lasting relationship. These include:

- **Listening.** It sounds simple but make sure you're listening as much as you're talking about yourself.
- **Dependability.** Your friends should always feel like they can count on you in both good times and bad. Good friends are those who are the first to drop what they're doing to help out when you're sick or hand you a tissue when you are upset. Try to keep your promises. If you're not sure you can do something, don't agree to do it then back out later.
- **Honesty and sincerity.** Your friends need to know that you are honest about your feelings and sincere with your advice. However, being honest is different from being so blunt that you're hurting someone's feelings. For example, you may be concerned about a friend who seems to have given up looking for a job, but instead of saying, "You need to get it together" or "You're not trying hard enough," gently inquire about what's going on in her life that's making her feel defeated -- then offer to help get her back on track.
- **Trustworthiness.** The most important element in any relationship is trust. People need to know that you'll keep confidences.
- **Forgiveness.** Any lasting relationship involves forgiveness. Don't let resentment build up. If you're angry at a friend, tell them why and talk about the issue.
- **Unconditional support.** Good friends accept you for who you are. They love you despite your flaws. They're patient when you make mistakes and encourage you to reach your goals. They only have your best interests at heart.
- **Staying connected.** The demands of work and family can cause people to lose touch. Sometimes a simple email, Facebook post, tweet or phone call is all that's needed to show you still care. Even if you're miles apart, a friendship can be maintained.

For more information on making and developing friendships or accessing a mental health professional, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.