



Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky's Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Emily Smith discusses building strong social networks to sustain us during isolating times. And now, Emily Smith.

Hi, I'm Emily Smith from the UK Center on Trauma and Children, welcome to this edition of the Well@Work podcast. Before COVID-19, many of us thought of crises in the short term, disasters were things like hurricanes and their devastation prompted immediate action. But the pandemic has been a cataclysm no one was prepared for. And while COVID-19 is the easily named threat, the social isolation that has accompanied it is dangerous in ways people often underestimate; recent research has shown that social isolation of less than 10 days can have negative effects on people's mental health for years in the future. It's not surprising then that the pandemic has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses, whether diagnosed or undiagnosed. In early days of quarantine, the sheer novelty prompted people to get involved in virtual meetups, safe outdoor gatherings, and to generally work to try to maintain some form of connection when what was normal became life-threatening. Months into this, chronic stress has drained many people of the energy to maintain those efforts.

There's an abundance of research on the positive effects of social interactions on one's mental health, but it's one thing to have an intellectual understanding of how neurotransmitters respond to a good conversation and another to have the energy to put that into practice, especially when you have to explain again to your angry child that they can't see their friends. Even the most extroverted people might find it all too tempting to hide under the covers, ignore everything and everyone, and hope that things might somehow magically go back to normal. But the reality is that family and social support greatly reduce the impact of chronic stress and help build greater resilience in people of all ages. Avoidance might feel self-protective, but supportive social connections are especially necessary during times of crisis. And though it might feel overwhelming, there are some small ways to increase social support in your life which will help you face the stress caused by the pandemic.

Jordan has become adept at being psychologically flexible, despite some big disappointments like missing a traditional high school graduation and college experience, Jordan was able to stay upbeat and positive. Until suddenly, everything began to feel like too much, and Jordan just couldn't handle anymore. Jordan ignored texts, skipped virtual lectures, and stayed in bed scrolling through old social media posts and random news articles. After not hearing from Jordan for a couple of days, several friends became concerned and decided they needed to check in. They listened to Jordan vent about struggles with loneliness, encouraged them to reconnect with family, and suggested finding a therapist when things felt like they were too much. They decided they would do a weekly zoom call and try to watch some of their favorite shows together, too. Having friends reach out reminded Jordan that people cared, making Jordan finally feel capable of getting out of bed. Jordan stopped feeling alone, connected with family, and worked with professors to make up missed assignments.



Here are some tips on how to build and nurture your social connections to help sustain you and your family through these unprecedentedly challenging times.

Tip one: start small. Be honest with yourself about your current level of comfort around socializing, it's okay if you're not up to doing a virtual meetup or feel panicked about reaching out to multiple friends and relatives. Don't overwhelm yourself. The aim of this is to help decrease stress, not add to it.

Tip two: plan a family night. Talk with your family about small things you all can do together more regularly like cooking dinner, weekend bike rides, or walks around the neighborhood with a family dog.

Tip three: be open about your fears. Talk with your family about any fears they have around socializing. Be sure your children are aware of the importance of safety, but also that it's okay to be angry, upset, or scared. A therapist can help if you're struggling with socialization and can offer needed support, advice, and a safe space to share feelings.

Tip four: be open to new experiences. Attending a volunteer event, meeting a co-worker for a hike, or joining an alumni group could be a good way to meet others with similar interests. If you're up to the challenge, try to talk to one stranger in the group; it might feel uncomfortable, but could offer a mood boost to both of you and might even lead to a friendship. For kids, joining a school club or an after-school program offering COVID safe precautions may provide similar opportunities. Some workplaces or universities also offer networking events or virtual speed friending events. If you're concerned about breakthrough COVID or spreading COVID to family members not yet vaccinated, social events outdoors or on virtual platforms may be the safest choice and still offer the benefit of social connection. Look to your local health department for guidance on social distancing and group size before committing to an in-person event.

Tip five: nurture existing relationships. Maintaining healthy relationships isn't without effort. If you've felt isolated and distant from family and friends, think of small ways to begin to reconnect; plan a date night or a fun activity like Mario Kart tournaments with your cousins. Even if you haven't heard from them in a long time, reach out to a close friend to see if they would like to catch up over a zoom call. Though there's the possibility of rejection, your friends or extended family might be just as nervous to reach out as you are. It's likely that the people who matter in your life haven't actually disappeared because of COVID, but it certainly may feel like that. Most will be happy to have the reminder that they still have people in their lives who care. Investing time in relationships shows others that you value them and their place in your life. It may take a few tries and some awkwardness to reconnect, but try to stay positive even if it doesn't work out with everyone.

Tip six: choose quality over quantity. Your social network doesn't need to be large to be supportive, remind your family of this as well. Some have small friend groups, some larger ones, the value is in the quality of the relationships. Healthy relationships are trusting, respectful, and non-judgmental; true friends make time for one another, support one



another, and are open and honest. Modeling healthy relationships for others can show the benefits of being a good friend.

In a previous Well@Work podcast, “Healthy Peer Networks,” Cambria Rose Walsh shared some ways that peer networks in the workplace can benefit mental health and job satisfaction, the tips that she shared can be applied to relationships outside of the workplace too.

You can find a link to the podcast on the Well@Work website and in the episode notes. Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.