



Pathways to Wellness with Family and Friends

What influences health? People often think about the environment or lifestyle factors such as diet, physical activity, and sleep. What people may think about less is the effect family, friends, and social networks have on health. Relationships affect physical, mental, and social well-being. In fact, people with strong social connections live longer, healthier lives than those who have few or poor-quality relationships. Figure 1 shows how relationships fit into the bigger picture of factors that influence health.

Relationships and health evolve over time. Think back to childhood: Who determined the kind of food served, bedtime, or how often teeth were brushed? For many, family and caregivers influenced those health behaviors. Now think about who has the most influence on health and related behaviors as an adult. Relationships grow and change over time. During adolescence and young adulthood, friends and other peers or romantic partners begin to play a bigger role in shaping health behaviors. In older adulthood, siblings, extended family members, children, or grandchildren have more influence. Family, friends, and other connections over a lifetime both positively and negatively influence health. They affect decisions about food, physical activity, use of drugs or alcohol, and stress management. Relationships have short-term and long-lasting effects, even after they end or change.

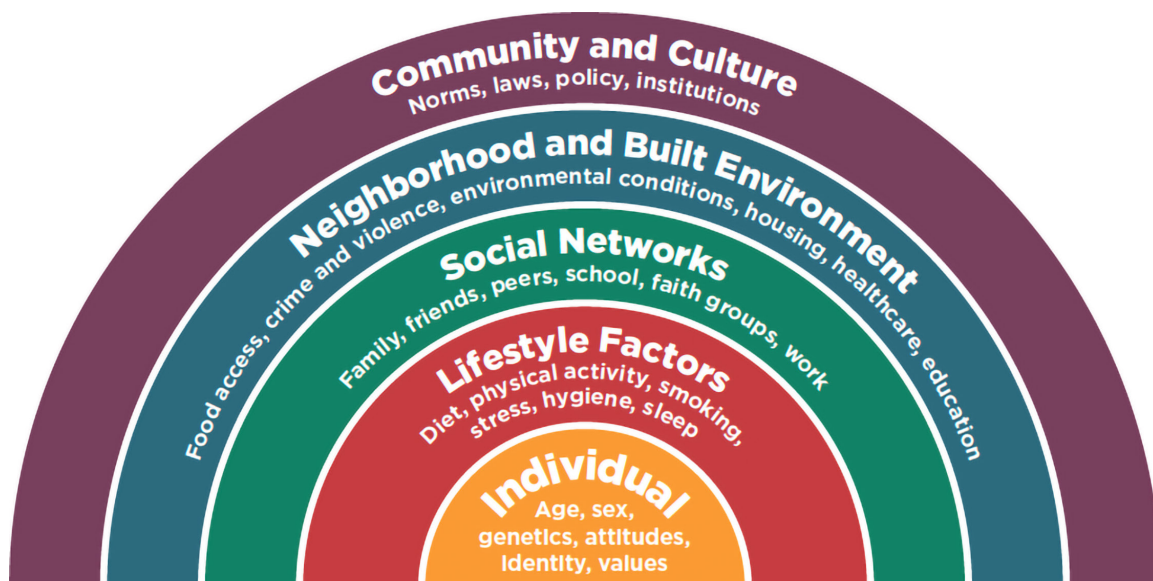
How Relationships Influence Health and Well-being

Relationships can both help and harm health through cumulative effects on the body, brain, and behaviors. This means the effects of nurturing or stressful relationships accumulate over time. The effects of relationships on the body, the brain, and behavior are closely linked.

Stress over long periods of time causes wear and tear on the body, which increases risk for future health problems. However, positive, loving relationships can be protective against feelings of stress and reduce the negative effects stress has on the body. For young children, stable and responsive relationships promote healthy development. This reduces their risk for chronic health conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, or obesity, later in life.

Social support benefits physical and mental health. Social support means feeling loved, encouraged, cared for, and listened to. Having people to turn to for advice or help with health-related tasks can lessen the body's physical responses to stress. Social support can positively affect health behaviors, such as trying to quit smoking and getting more physical activity. Social support can also create a sense of purpose in life. The meaning given to relationships impacts health-related decisions. For example, caring for children or adult family

Figure 1. Placing the influence of family, friends, and social networks on health and well-being within the multiple levels of influence on health.



Adapted from Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991

Figure 2. Examples of adverse childhood experiences.



Source: National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center

members can change behaviors. The feeling of responsibility for someone else’s health could spur healthier behaviors.

Spoken and unspoken cultural rules, or norms, set the standards for health behaviors. Norms are learned at an early age from families, friends, and other social groups such as religious affiliations and racial or ethnic identities. Social norms are powerful. They hold power because they are a generally accepted way of behaving, feeling, or thinking. In turn, the behaviors of families, friends, and people in other social groups serve as models of behavior that can help or harm health habits. If parents and siblings smoke, children are more likely to smoke. If family members eat fruit and vegetables, children are more likely to eat fruit and vegetables. Friends and romantic partners have similar effects on adolescents’ and adults’ behaviors. Social media heavily influences young people. They may distance themselves from their parents, family, and community as they turn to influencers for information. Young people might mirror the good or bad behaviors they see on social media.

The Impact of Relationships on Health Can Be Complicated

Relationships have many positive effects on physical and mental health. But they can also be significant sources of

stress. Sometimes one relationship can be the largest source of both stress and support. Relationship stress can come from ongoing conflict and caregiving for children, partners, and aging parents. Stress can also come from events such as an argument or divorce.

Potentially traumatic events that occur before the age of 18 are called conventional and expanded adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Figure 2 shows examples of the types of adversity that experts consider potentially harmful. Conventional ACEs are stressors that occur within a household. These types of stressors include abuse, neglect, and potentially harmful living situations. Expanded ACEs are stressors that occur outside a household. These types of stressors include witnessing violence, living in an unsafe neighborhood, experiencing racism or bullying, and living in foster care. Conventional and expanded ACEs trigger the fight or flight response and over time can damage the body. Depending on the duration, intensity, and severity of ACEs, people can experience negative, lasting effects on health, well-being, and education and job opportunities. Stressors can also prompt unhealthy coping behaviors. People might turn to smoking, heavy drinking,

physical inactivity, or overeating to cope. The combination of stressful experiences and unhealthy coping behaviors have a long-lasting impact on emotional, cognitive, social, and physical health.

If you or anyone you know (regardless of age) is experiencing abuse, neglect, or unsafe living conditions, find help. You or a trusted adult can call one of these groups:

- Kentucky Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline: 1-877-597-2331
- Kentucky VINE victim notification network: 1-800-511-1670
- Parent and caregiver helpline: 1-800-CHILDREN
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE or text “LOVEIS” to 1-866-331-9475

Ways to Nurture Relationships to Positively Impact Health and Well-being

Relationships will change throughout the lifespan. They will need constant nurturing and reevaluation. The following ideas can positively influence actions so that family and friends help, rather than harm, health and well-being. It is also important to provide similar support to them.

Identify who has a positive influence on health.

Think about connections with people who make you feel loved and supported. What about those relationships improves your health and well-being? Take time to share specifically how they support your health and well-being. This feedback can help people recognize supportive actions they may have been unaware of. This can open the door for more conversations about how to best support one another.

Directly state needs.

If people are not supportive of health and well-being, it can be important to say something. Using “I” statements can help steer difficult conversations. They allow people to express feelings and effects of certain actions without placing blame or additional strain on a relationship. Figure 3 shows the formula for “I” statements.

An example of an “I” statement is as follows: I feel frustrated when I juggle the household chores and take care of kids each day because I do not have a moment to pause and do something to take care of myself. What I need is 20 minutes to myself so I can go for a walk and reset.

Create new or healthier routines.

Daily routines and special traditions can be modified so that the new norms support health and wellness. Take time to think and talk about current habits and traditions. Are you staying up late to binge-watch the latest show? Do you scroll social media for hours each day? Do social events revolve around going out to eat? Pick one small change then create specific, realistic action plans for how to achieve that change. For example, identify a time to turn off or stop using screens before bed. Invite others to be part of creating and planning new routines that work for everyone.

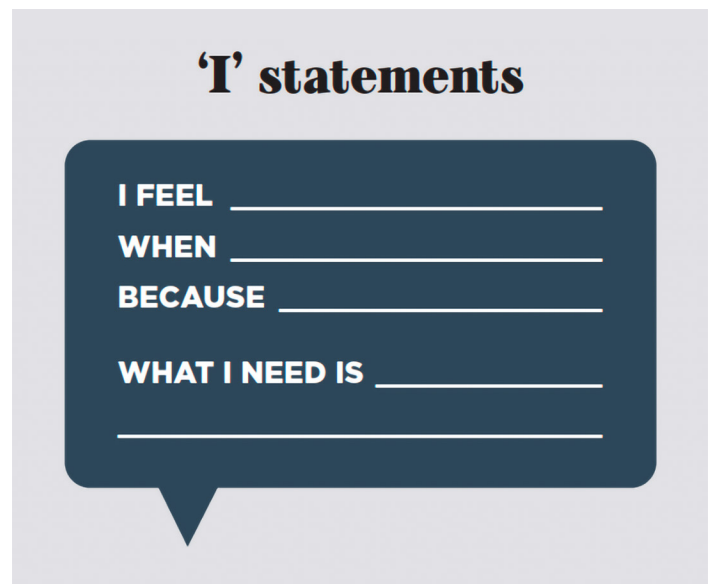
Find a role model or be a role model of healthier behaviors.

Reach out to people who have successfully made changes you are interested in or who demonstrate behaviors you value. Also think about how you can be a role model for family, friends, and peers. Children can access healthy peer and adult role models through extracurricular activities like sports, 4-H Club, or a health club. No matter the age, role models can be a social support on the journey to improve health and well-being.

Connect with resources that support safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments.

It is expected to need help navigating new or difficult relationships or life circumstances. Many local resources may be available to support pregnant women, parents, and other caregivers. Agencies also may help prevent intimate partner violence, treat mental illness and substance use, give

Figure 3. A formula for creating “I” statements.



access to high quality child care, and income support. Your local Cooperative Extension office can help connect you with these resources.

Conclusion

Relationships have great impact on health and well-being. Seeing how the actions of family, friends, and other social ties support or challenge behavior and health goals can prompt change. Taking advantage of support to nurture relationships, communicate health goals, and make small changes together can improve your health and well-being. It can also help those closest to you.

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