

# SOCIAL CONNECTION

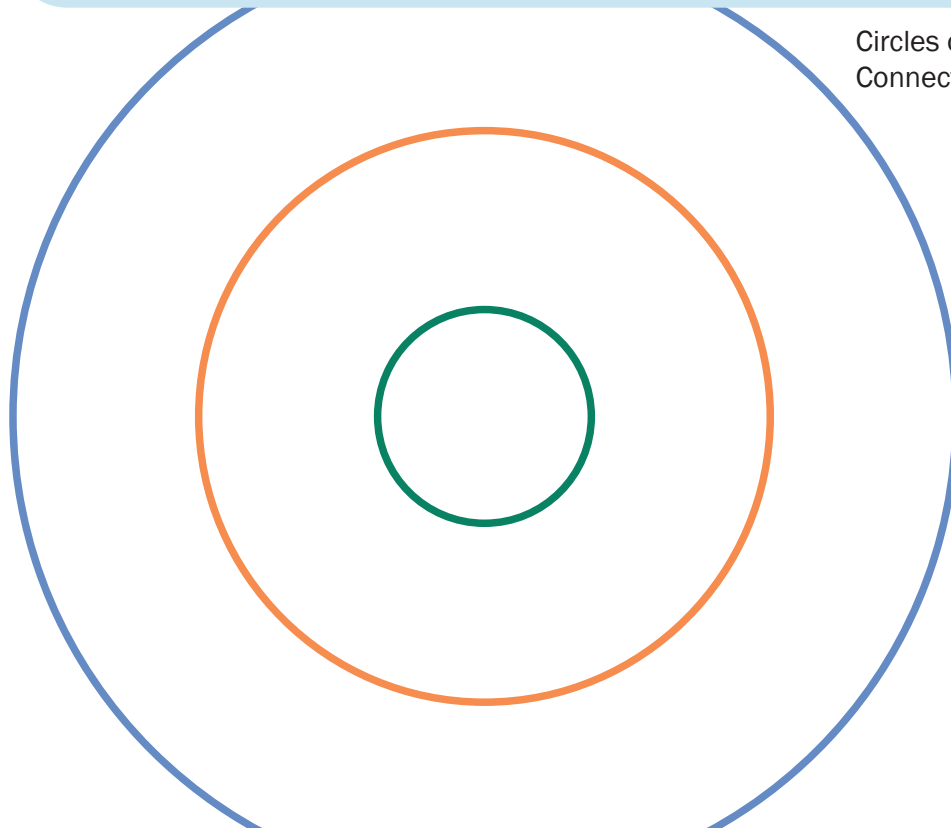


AMERICAN COLLEGE OF  
Lifestyle Medicine



# SOCIAL CONNECTION NETWORK MAP

Building and maintaining relationships requires effort, but even small steps can lead to significant gains over time; as the landmark, Harvard Grant Study notes, “How happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health.[1]” This map is designed to help individuals identify their social resources and assess the quality of their relationships. It can be used to set goals for improving social connections. Discussing each connection category (circles) on the map with a mental health professional can provide valuable insights to help one better understand their resources and offer strategies to enhance communication, manage conflicts, and cultivate healthier and more fulfilling relationships.



Circles of Connection[2]

- In the inner circle, write up to 5 people with whom you are most closely connected.
- In the middle circle, write up to 5 occasional companions (past/present school/work friends, distant relatives).
- In the outer circle, write up to 5 places you regularly visit and see people familiar to them but not close with. (e.g., grocery store, gym or yoga class, places of worship, school/work).

Network Map adapted from Columbia School of Social Work <https://ssnm.columbia.edu/map/tutorial/>

## Inner Circle – Close Connections

- Significant others, close friends, family
- People that an individual relies on for protection, support, and help during a need or crisis
- Strongest mutual bonds that require the most time and energy
- Close friends can move from the inner to the middle circle if less time is spent with them
- People spend over half of their time in their inner circle.

## Middle Circle - Occasional Companions

- Former classmates, extended family members
- They are not our closest confidants but will likely assist, especially when requested.
- Less strong connections have the potential to grow stronger.
- These acquaintances tend to change more often.
- This circle becomes more challenging to maintain as people age, with limited time for socializing

## Outer Circle – Coworkers and Acquaintances

- Support from organizations like work/school, grocery stores, places of worship, etc.
- These are friendly relationships that exist on the edges of our lives.
- Less intimate connections, but they still contribute to a feeling of belonging.
- Spending time expanding the outer circle supports building inner circles.

## All Our Social Connections Have a Significant Role

Social connections are crucial for well-being. People who make friends are naturally protected from loneliness, and everyone can learn to build social connections, regardless of age. While prolonged loneliness can lead to stress and illness, it's possible to make changes to reduce loneliness. It's important to assess the needs for each of the three categories of social connections: Close Connections, Occasional Companions, and Colleagues/Acquaintances.[3]

These categories are not fixed and will change as relationships fluctuate. Engaging in activities can help expand one's outer circle and, as a result, strengthen middle and inner circles over time. Additionally, we can draw support from the memory of loved ones. This allows individuals to keep their values, lessons, and presence alive within us, providing comfort and stability.

For further discussion, note the connections on the Network Map, mark the connections that provide support with a plus sign (+), and mark the connections that cause strain with a negative sign (-). The following questions can be helpful for reflection and used to initiate a discussion with your provider about the next steps you want to take to improve your existing relationships:

SUPPORT	STRAIN
<input type="checkbox"/> Do you feel cared for by friends/family?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do you feel that friends/family make too many demands?
<input type="checkbox"/> Do you feel understood by them?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do you feel that they criticize you?
<input type="checkbox"/> Can you rely on them?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do they let you down?
<input type="checkbox"/> Can you open up to them?	<input type="checkbox"/> Do they get on your nerves?

Survey adapted from Yang et al., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 2016 [4]



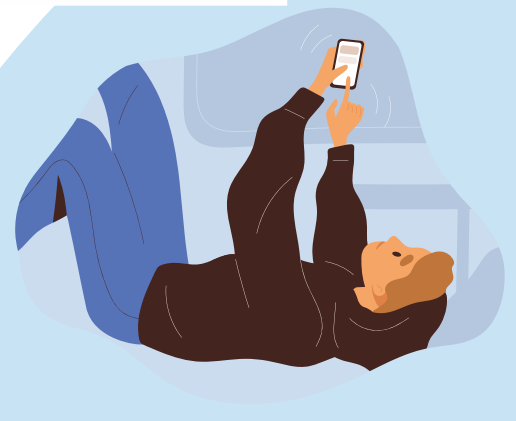
**Technology's Dual Role:** Technology plays a dual role in social connections. On one hand, it facilitates reaching out to people we care about, bridging geographical distances. On the other hand, it can become a distraction that hinders meaningful face-to-face interactions. The constant use of smartphones or other devices can divert our attention from the present moment and disrupt real-world connections.

**Texting and Superficial Interactions:** Texting, while convenient, can make it harder to connect deeply with others. It often replaces face-to-face or phone conversations, which are crucial for building genuine connections. Quick messages and emojis can't replace the nuances of in-person communication, potentially leading to shallower relationships.

**Online Gaming's Isolating Aspect:** Online gaming offers social interactions, but it can also contribute to isolation. Immersive gaming experiences may lead to spending less time engaging in local community activities or connecting with neighbors. This can limit access to in-person support when it's needed, potentially resulting in a lack of a robust local support network.

**Negative Thought Patterns:** Negative thought patterns developed in childhood, often referred to as self-limiting beliefs, can persist into adulthood. These beliefs can constrain our ability to form meaningful social connections. When we believe we're unworthy of love or friendship, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, fostering a sense of loneliness and preventing us from fully meeting our social needs.

"We need to make an effort to see friends we want to keep close, to work through conflict and exchange help in time of need."  
U.S. Surgeon General Vice Admiral, Vivek H. Murthy, MD



## Suggestions/Enhancements for Social Connections

**Use Technology Wisely:** Be mindful of how much time you spend on your devices and talking to friends online.

Notice if this causes any problems, like feeling disconnected from the real world. You can make things better by setting some rules, like taking breaks after an hour of screen time, keeping your gadgets out of your bedroom, and not using them when you're hanging out with people in person.

**Stay in Touch:** Sometimes, it's good to remind yourself to talk to your friends and family.

Even if you're worried about being too busy or getting interrupted, reaching out with calls or visits can make you feel closer and happier.

**Focus on Face-to-Face:** Try to connect with friends or family you see in real life.

If this seems hard, set a goal to say hi to someone face-to-face each day. You can also have a favorite question ready to ask them. Be open to sharing about yourself, be curious, and be ready to learn from others. Doing this can help you make stronger and more meaningful connections.

**Handle Conflicts:** To build good relationships, it's important to know how to handle disagreements.

This means being good at talking to others, listening carefully, trying to understand their feelings, finding solutions that work for everyone, and not letting arguments get out of control.

**Help Each Other:** It's great to have friends who can help you when you need it and for you to do the same for them.

Make sure your friendships are balanced, with both sides giving and receiving help. This makes your connections stronger and more lasting.

**Change Negative Thoughts:** Sometimes, we have thoughts that make us feel bad about ourselves or others.

Try to recognize these negative thoughts and understand where they come from. Once you know them, you can get help to change them. This can make your life happier and more fulfilling.

"Our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight – one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled, and more productive lives," said U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy.