

Strategy: Remind yourself regularly of all the people in your life who are special to you. Then, think of ways to make them a priority in your life.

“Wow! It’s been a month since I talked to my sister.”

“When was the last time we got together with Erik and Dan?”

“I wonder how Uncle Sid is doing these days?”

If you have thoughts like these sometimes, you may not be alone. With the busy lives we lead, it’s easy to go for days, weeks, or even months without talking to or seeing some of the people who are most important to us.

Nobody really needs to be reminded of the importance of these primary relationships with family members and close friends. They form the core of our “support system”; they are our main sources of social enjoyment and are most likely to be there for us when we need help.

A vast body of research has linked a strong support system of social relationships to better mental health (Caplan, 1974), better physical health (Cassel, 1976) and even lower mortality from various causes (House, 1998). For example, a six-year Harvard University study of 16,638 people (American Journal of Public Health) found that those with the largest social networks had the slowest rate of memory decline. Family and friends can mute the intensity of stress – and the brain’s chemical response.

Several generations ago, people didn’t have to think as much about how to make their “special people” more of a priority in their lives; in most cases, these people lived nearby. Thus, people tended to have much more regular contact with family and friends in the course of their daily activities. But, these days, most of us can’t depend on just “running into people.” So, we have to make it happen.

Staying Connected

Start by making a mental list of the people who are most important to you. Think about how many times you’ve been in contact with them in the past three months; not just in person, but by phone or e-mail too.

Ask yourself, is it enough? Is this how often – or how little – I really want to see that person? Maybe it is enough. But chances are there are at least some people you’d like to see more.

The next step is to decide which of these people are the most important, or the ones you feel you’re losing touch with. Start thinking how to make them priorities in your life. Remember, with our busy lives that tend to limit our social contacts with family and friends, we may have to make a special effort to keep these connections alive.

Make the Call

Just call somebody up and say, “It’s been a while, I’d like to get together for coffee, or a drink.” Of course, you can e-mail people or “text” them too, but voice contact still often has a bigger impact.

Invite Someone Over

Invite those who are special to you over more often. Try, “We’re having a few people over for a little end of summer dinner; would you like to come?” Pay attention to whether people are more comfortable visiting on their own, or with others.

Overcoming Inhibitions

One issue that gets in the way of contacting people is the feeling that we might be bothering them. If you’re really busy, they’re probably busy too. It might be hard to find a time when you are both available, but remember, if you are feeling out of touch, it is likely your friends and loved ones are feeling the same way. Chances are they will be grateful you were the one who took the initiative.

Connecting Electronically

Sending the occasional text message or posting a comment on someone’s Facebook page may seem like a superficial way of staying in touch, compared to a face-to-face get together; however, some research suggests that computer use tends to enhance social connections. For example, one study of Internet and e-mail use by Americans found that people who use e-mail tend to have more face-to-face contact with friends, family and associates.

This makes sense, since when we stay in touch with people electronically, we feel more connected. We have a more immediate sense of what is going on in the lives of our friends and extended family members. Facebook, originally designed as a way to help recent university graduates stay in touch, has now been widely embraced by millions as a method for friends and family members to connect.

Other people use blogs or on-line journals to stay in touch with friends and family. Connecting electronically can open the door to telephone and Skype conversations, face-to-face get togethers, and can even lead to marriage (e.g., online dating).

A Radical Idea: Send a Letter!

Fifty or more years ago handwritten letters were the main method by which people stayed in touch with friends and relatives who lived in other places. Now, due to e-mail, cell phones and all the other electronic means of communication, handwritten letters from friends and family members are more rare. People now receive mail mostly in the form of bills and junk mail advertising; so, a personal letter or card is often an exciting novelty. Give it a try.

Go Back and Check

Every once in awhile, revisit your list of important people. There may still be people you haven’t recently connected with. In the end, you may not be able to stay in regular contact with everybody on your list, but regularly thinking about the important people in your life will help you avoid falling out of touch.

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