



[Season 1: Episode 3: How to Establish Connections and Community](#)

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health & Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff with their healthiest lives.

Hello, everybody. This is Megan [Bergfeld] from Work/Life Connections-EAP, here with you again. I am excited to be here and to introduce you to our guest expert today. Makenzie Parks is here with us, and she is one of the clinical counselors in Work/Life Connections-EAP.

Welcome Makenzie.

MP: Thank you, Megan. I am glad to be here today.

MB: We just had Valentine's Day, which is commonly celebrated as a day of romance and love. But, on this month's episode of the Healthier You podcast, we thought we would expand on this some and talk about the concept of social support and the overall value of connection. This could include romance, but there is just so much more to it than that. Makenzie, you and I have known each other for years, both professionally and personally, and one of the things I have always admired about you is how you do friendship. So, I am excited to learn from you today. To start us off, what do we mean by social support and connection?

MP: So, to me, this means people that you can turn to in a time of need or crisis. This can, of course, include people like family and close friends. They might provide practical support. They might help you with things you need. They might give emotional support by listening to you or offering advice. Hopefully, these are people who remind you of who you are and kind of build you up when you are feeling low. Social support can also include a wider group that you are a part of. So, it might be friends of friends, acquaintances, or even your community. Social support is really that network that connects you to other people, and those connections might be close or a little bit further, but all of these connections are important and can serve a role in our lives.

M: Why is connection so important?

MP: You know, last year, the Surgeon General put out a report on loneliness and how it is such an epidemic in our society right now. Loneliness is really bad for our physical health and our mental health. The report even says that loneliness may increase our risk of things like heart disease or stroke, depression or anxiety, and our risk for premature death goes up. So, social connections can protect us from loneliness. It is super important and good for us to be connected to other people. Social connection is also what makes our community safe and a good place to be. It is a good way to increase our community safety and resilience. Humans have historically relied on each other for survival. Modern people are still wired for that connection, and that proximity with others. Given the risks of loneliness

and isolation, it is really important to invest time and energy in building our social connections. This is something that we can work on. If you are listening right now and you feel discouraged because you don't have the kind of connections you want, and if you feel like you want them to be in a different place, keep listening because this is something we can work on together.

M: I know that the surgeon general's report was definitely a very eye-opening read for a lot of us, especially in healthcare. I think COVID has really shifted how we interact with the world. I know working from home all the time was isolating and lonely every now and then, but I have also noticed that things still feel quite separate, even though some of us are back to working in the office. I still work from home as often as I can. I still have my groceries delivered. I still tend to stay home as much as I possibly can. That is my go-to mode. So, even people I love dearly I don't see as much. Just the other day, I had a question that I knew one of my friends could answer, but I hadn't talked to her in so long that I hesitated to contact her for something that I needed. It felt pretty disappointing, at that moment, to realize that we weren't as close as we used to be. So, what do we do if we feel like we don't have close friends or a network we can count on right now?

MP: Well, first know that you are not alone. A lot of people are feeling this way, especially post-COVID. I think we have this expectation of having super close friendships and relationships, almost like this fantasy of having a "found" family. This concept is beautiful, but these kinds of relationships are really rare. We put so much emphasis on only having the closest of friends and I think sometimes we miss opportunities for connection that are right in front of us.

M: That is very true. Found family narratives are my favorite books to read, for sure, but they are most of the time fantasy novels, right. So, you're suggesting we should broaden our focus to a wider array of connection types.

MP: Yes. It's great to take the pressure off ourselves, to only have friends, like in the show Friends. Those inner circle people are so important, and we can't discount the value of that kind of relationship, but we also can't discount the value of general connections. And, we all have more connections than we realize. When we think about social support, it is important to explore beyond just that inner circle. So, let's visualize this for just a second. Think of a target, you know imagine these concentric circles. The inner circle includes the people that you are the closest to. So, this might be a partner, family, or friends. People who make you feel safe and maybe people that they are safe enough that you feel like you can share a secret with. One of my favorite definitions of a close, close friend is: someone who reminds you of who you are. So, those are the people in that circle. For most people, the circle is pretty small. It might only be one or two people. So, that's the most inner level. One level out includes people that you know and care about, but maybe you don't share as much with them as you do with your inner circle. So, they still play a supportive role in your life. They might be friends, family, coworkers, neighbors, but maybe just not as close as that inner circle. But, still know each other, still care about each other. So, those are the first two levels. Then we go one more level out. This might be acquaintances or people that you see regularly, but you don't know as well. So, this could be friends of friends, or maybe you go to the same coffee shop on the weekend and you see a barista there every weekend, or your kids play sports together, but you don't know the other parents super well, your neighbors, people that you already sort of have a soft introduction to, and you have the opportunity to get to know each other a little bit better because there is something that you have in common. So, that is our third layer. And then, one more level out, is your community at large. So, this can include any kind of community that you are a part of. For me, that is being a Nashvillian. That's being a Vanderbilt employee. This might

include a religious or cultural group. These are people that you have something in common with, but you maybe don't know at all, yet.

MB: Like when I start to write it out like that, I realized I have way more connections than I thought I did. Which is a really... Right, that's good to know. Makenzie, what if we see a level that is particularly sparse? How do we build connection?

MP: Absolutely. I would say that there are two different ways to go about this. So, first, let's talk about strengthening connections that you already have. I think the easiest way to do that is by choosing one of those toward the middle circles, and identifying a specific person that you would like to get to know better. So, let's do a little example. Megan let's look at your social support network. Is there someone you can think of that you would like to build a stronger connection with?

MB: Absolutely, I think that friend I mentioned earlier. I previously would have included her in one of those two most inner circles, and I'd love to reconnect with her, but I don't really know how to restart the friendship.

MP: I think that is a perfect example. So, in this situation, I think the easiest thing to do would be to reach out, maybe in a text, whatever feels comfortable, and just acknowledge that time has passed, because, I do think that is probably an important thing to acknowledge. So, acknowledge that some time has passed and tell her that you were thinking about her the other day. Truthfully, the soft invite that has never failed me is: "If you ever wanted to get coffee and catch up, I would love to do that with you." So, at that point, the ball is in her court. You've reached out, and if she is up for it, she will respond to you. Now, I do want to recognize that this example does require a certain level of vulnerability.

MB: That's for sure.

MP: You wouldn't say this to someone that you don't know very well. It really wouldn't even make sense. So, this sort of shows me the circle that she was in for you previously. You feel safe enough to put that out there to her. So, I think that is a great example of how to strengthen a connection you already have. And, likely, like I said, with those people that are maybe in those middle or closer circles. The other thing you can do is work on building new connections. So, this typically involves being friendly to someone in those outer circles. So, are you up for another example? OK, great. So, let's think together. Is there someone that maybe you see frequently that you don't know very well, and you're interested in getting to know just a little bit better?

MB: Actually, yes. There's a lady that I thought of when you were walking through the circles. She lives in my neighborhood. We always seem to be walking our dogs at the same time, so, we might wave. We know each other's names. We say hello, but that's kind of the extent of it. We usually keep walking and that's it. We have never had a real conversation, so I think she's a person that I could build a bigger connection with.

MP: So, you already have a community connection with this person, right. You live in the same place, but maybe you want to enhance the connection. So, I think one way you could do that is the next time you see each other, you could ask a question about her dog. Or, you could even say something simple like: "Hi, I always see you at this time. I'm Megan, what's your name?" Right? It can be that simple. You don't have to invite her over to your house. It can just be a casual connection. And, I know, it can sound kind of scary or anxiety producing to talk to new people, but as we talked about today, I think most

people are seeking connection. Loneliness is an epidemic. Not everyone has room in their life for a super close friend, but I do think most people are up for those casual connections.

MB: I like this a lot. Because, honestly, I don't always have room in my life for more than that. Again, homebody. I don't always have room for it. So, I love this idea that connections don't have to be all or nothing to be meaningful.

MP: That's exactly right. That's the whole point.

MB: So, listeners. If you have stuck with us through this, I encourage you to consider walking through this exercise yourself. Draw a target on a piece of paper and fill in your levels. If you want more information on this, or help walking through your own circles of support, please consider scheduling a no-cost, confidential appointment with an EAP counselor. Also, if this topic is something you would like to hear more about in future podcasts, please let us know. You can either email me or put a comment in the REDCap survey, if you are including this podcast in your Go for the Gold efforts this year.

Makenzie, thank you so much for joining me. This was a lot of fun.

MP: Thank you for having me.

MB: Until next time everybody, take care.

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