

# Nurturing Relationships in a Digital World

Technology has changed the way we communicate. Texting, emails, video calls, and especially social media have collectively become the new norm, generally changing the way we communicate and develop and maintain relationships.

There once was a time when many of us had a handful of close friends and a larger circle of acquaintances—such as our neighbors and coworkers. Today, that circle has expanded to hundreds of virtual friends through social media and digital connections.

While digital technology has tremendous benefits, it can also hamper our ability to establish and maintain relationships in the real world.

## Advantages of relationships in the digital world

**Maintain family and cultural ties.** Many of us have family members across the country or around the globe. This can increase any feelings of alienation and loneliness. But social media allows grandparents in India and cousins in the United States to be part of our daily lives and for us to stay connected to our culture and roots.

**Find old friends and make new ones.** One of the key elements for good mental health is having supportive friends. Even the shyest person can meet new people online.

**Boost our self-esteem.** Don't we all feel good when our posts receive several "likes" or positive comments or our complaints receive sympathy?

## The downside of relationships in the digital world

As more people are choosing digital relationships over face-to-face ones, more are finding the complexities and nuances of real-life interactions increasingly difficult. In fact, extensive use of electronic devices to connect with others can be a barrier to how we interact in the real world and actually inhibit the development of deep, meaningful, and lasting relationships. Online "friends" or "followers" rarely know us well or care deeply about our wellbeing. They can't replace real-life confidants and loved ones.

The digital world also allows people to present an edited or idealized version of themselves or only communicate what they want people to know. No one sees and hears their less than perfect moments. This can give a person the impression that all their friends are living perfect lives, always looking photo-ready, and having a constant stream of wonderful and exciting experiences. The usual, mundane, normal things are generally left out of most people's social media posts, which can give the impression these normal things aren't happening in most others' lives.

## Keeping digital relationships real

While the digital world allows us to stay in touch with old friends, share your interests with new friends, and increase your professional network it's important to continue developing and nurturing relationships in the real world. The secret is balance. Try the following tips:

**Keep online relationships in perspective.** Online relationships are no substitute for real-life ones. An expressive emoji can't replace shedding a tear or a laugh with a trusted friend or family member. The digital world may connect us with hundreds of people, but it can also increase our sense of social isolation because we don't feel the closeness that comes from direct, in-person contact. One way to identify your true close friendships is to picture yourself in a crisis situation and ask: Who is right beside me in that moment? Whom do I call to come provide support and help? Those people are your true and closest friends.

**Find offline ways to boost confidence.** It's great when people in our online community "like" or "share" our posts, but we can become so accustomed to receiving constant validation online that we expect it offline as well. In addition, basing our self-worth on other people's values instead of our own can make us unhappy. Instead, we need to focus on self-validation. Here are a few ways we can do this:

- **Create a support system.** We need to surround ourselves with people who accept us for who we are, believe in us, listen to our problems, and support us. If you need help, contact your assistance program for resources and support.
- **Stop judging ourselves.** While it's good to be realistic and acknowledge both our shortcomings and our strengths, it's not beneficial to constantly criticize ourselves. When your inner voice becomes harsh or negative—"I'm a failure" or "I'll never measure up"—remind yourself that you'd never say those words to someone else. Instead, say "I'm only human and am doing my best." Our imperfections make us unique, and our mistakes help us grow. Tell yourself the same things you would tell your best friend.
- **Help others.** Seeing the positive impact we have on others is the best form of validation. Agree with others to put all phones away in family or social gatherings so everyone can be truly present with the others who are there.
- **Limit time online.** The digital world can be an essential business tool as well as a medium for fun and entertainment. It can also encroach on all aspects of our lives. It's hard to resist responding to every post on our newsfeed or text alert. Set a goal to unplug regularly and take a walk with a neighbor or friend. Make a pact that the whole family unplugs for an hour every evening or on Saturdays. Instead, spend time together—play board games, get outside, or simply have dinner together and catch up on the day.

The digital world can, if used properly, enhance your real-world relationships—for example Skype allows far flung family and friends to speak face-to-face and social media platforms provide a means to share updates, news, photos, and videos. However, online relationships cannot replace real-world interactions that contribute to the development of deep, meaningful, and lasting relationships. It's important to find a balance.

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