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Title: Foster Relationships to Strengthen Communities

California has seen more than its share of challenges this year -- from devastating wildfires to events causing anxiety and depression, and deadly acts of violence. It’s easy to feel despair when following the news, even if we aren’t personally affected by these challenges. And for those who have been directly affected, the burden can be even heavier.

Strong emotions and uncertainty are common reactions to traumatic events. However, it’s important to remember that there is hope. By creating supportive relationships with meaningful conversations and listening to one another, we strengthen our communities to be resilient.

Fostering connections can occur in: loving, close families; trusted friends; romantic relationships; active relationships with mentors, sponsors, and/or teachers; a group of people with a shared ethnic or cultural identity; a peer group at school, the place you worship, your neighborhood, or any other community important to you.

Although strong, supportive relationships are critical for our well-being, only around half of Americans have meaningful in-person social interactions, daily (such as a long conversation with a friend). While new technologies and ways of communicating may play a role in this trend, simply saying people should cut down social media use isn’t the the only way to solve the human connection problem.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So how do we create more meaningful in-person social interactions? All of us can start close to home (or better yet, *at home*) by [learning how to be a better listener](https://www.forbes.com/sites/womensmedia/2012/11/09/10-steps-to-effective-listening/#32ce65923891) and practicing those skills regularly.

Open, attentive, non-judgmental listening to others helps them feel seen and heard, and increases feelings of connection -- for both the person speaking and for you, the listener. Here’s a short list of how to do it:

* Face your speaker and keep eye contact with them, if appropriate for their culture.
* Be attentive and relaxed.
* Listen without jumping to conclusions, and try to picture what they are saying.
* Don’t interrupt; don’t offer solutions too quickly.
* Ask questions to make sure you understand their views.
* Try to feel what they are feeling, and give cues to show that you’re paying attention.
* Finally, pay attention to what else they are communicating, through body language, gestures, tone of voice, and facial expressions.

Take these skills into your community: at work, school, or your neighborhood, and practice the art of really listening to others, especially when you don’t agree with what they’re saying. When others are curious about what you’re doing, pass the skills along to them and you may notice more people in your life listening to *you* as well.

In your efforts to listen more, you might notice that people talk about the more day-to-day aspects of their lives but may hesitate to share more difficult topics. That’s ok, you’re still fostering stronger relationships. Connecting with others in a meaningful way doesn’t mean that you are talking about difficult or more painful topics all the time. Ideally, connection should include a mix of everyday topics, celebration, laughing, sadness, shared frustration, remembering, planning, giving help, receiving help, *and* more difficult topics when they arise.

What’s most important is that you create safety in the relationship and let the other person know that if they want to talk about something difficult, you are there to listen and offer unconditional support. If you’re part of an organization, company, school or other community group you can also [use tools and activities to help members connect more deeply with one another and reach out when they need support](https://www.eachmindmatters.org/may2019/).

We have a lot of challenges to improve our broader society. The problems are complex and deeply-rooted. But by turning our attention to building resilience through better connections in our own lives and strengthening our communities we’ll take important steps to become happier and healthier.

1. <https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)