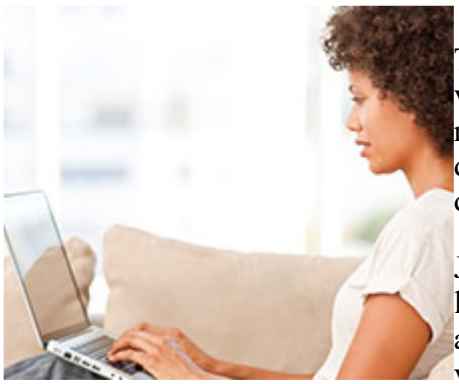
Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Relationships in a digital world



Technology has changed the way we communicate. Texting, emails, video calls, and especially social media have, have become the new norms, replacing telephones and face-to-face conversations. These digital means of communication have also changed the way we develop and maintain relationships.

Just 20 years ago, most of us had a handful of close friends and a larger circle of acquaintances (neighbors, coworkers, business associates etc.). Today, that circle is even larger, with 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.
- Improve 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 screen-to-screen relationships over face-to-face ones, so more are finding the complexities and nuances of real life interactions increasingly difficult. In fact, electronic devices and the online world can be barriers 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 well-being. They can’t replace real-life confidants and loved ones.

The digital world also allows us to present an edited or idealized version of ourselves or only communicate what we want people to know. No one sees and hears our less than perfect moments.

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 emoji or acronym such as LOL 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.

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- **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 opinion of ourselves on other people's values instead of our own can make us unhappy. Instead we need to focus on self-validation. We can do this in many ways, including:
- **Creating 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 Employee 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," "I'm an idiot" -- 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.
- **Helping others.** Seeing the positive impact we have on others is the best form of validation.
- **Limit time online.** The digital world can be an essential business tool as well as fun and entertaining. It can also encroach on all aspects of our lives. It's hard not to respond to every email and text alert.. 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, photographs 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.