

life lines

information for your life

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Contact Us

TOLL-FREE: 1-800-779-6125

EMAIL:

info@connectionseap.com

www.connectionseap.com

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CHANGE THE PACE: STRIKE OUT ON YOUR OWN

Are you tired of spending time on the phone, calling friends or neighbors to see what's going on Friday or Saturday? You scramble to make plans, maybe try to get a date—just as long as you don't miss out on the latest happenings in your social circle.

Instead of keeping up with your social circuit (as usual), why not strike out on your own? Whether it's staying in or going out, enjoying time alone can be an empowering experience—plus it's a confidence booster knowing how easily you can enjoy it!

Here are some ideas to get you rolling:

- 1. Pamper yourself.** Going out to eat or having a few drinks in a smoke-filled bar isn't always healthy, but staying in and giving yourself a facial or a pedicure and getting a good's night sleep IS!
- 2. Organize your home.** Do all that boring stuff you've been putting off for a year: Reorganize your desk, clean out your closet, or throw out old belongings from the attic. It may not sound fun, but if you turn on your favorite music or a movie while you're working, it's not that bad. Plus you'll

have an enormous weight lifted off your shoulders and a sense of pride and accomplishment when you're done!

- 3. Learn to cook or some other indoor hobby.** You can never go wrong with cooking, especially if it's learning to cook healthy and delicious meals for yourself. If you already know how to cook or don't want to learn, take up some other hobby you can pursue on days you choose to stay in.
- 4. Try an outdoor sports activity.** Outdoor hobbies can be fun and adventurous—simultaneously getting you out of the stuffy indoors and into nature. A change of scenery and some fresh air is just what the doctor ordered. As an added plus, outdoor activities like canoeing, snowboarding, or hiking result in a more toned and in-shape body!
- 5. Read a book.** Do you feel like you're not as well educated on a particular subject as you'd like to be? Whether it's politics, world history, or knitting, it can never hurt to read and educate yourself on something new.

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CHANGE THE PACE: STRIKE OUT ON YOUR OWN (Contd.,)

6. **Write a book.** It doesn't matter if you don't like to write—the point is that you do something you've always wanted to do (or thought about doing), but never made or had time for. How many projects have you thought of that you just can't imagine starting with your busy work schedule? "When I retire I can finally write/paint/sew/cook/create my masterpiece!" could become, "**Tonight** I can start my masterpiece!"
7. **Volunteer at an animal shelter.** Playing with puppies and kittens for free while simultaneously doing a good deed—that doesn't sound bad, does it? If animals are not your forte, pick some other community service that interests you (recycling, elder care, wildlife preservation...the choices are endless).
8. **Go on vacation!** Even if it's just a day trip to the beach, the mountains, or the next town over, it's great to see a new place you've always wanted to explore. Getting out of your regular environment and expanding your horizons can be very relaxing and inspiring.
9. **Work out.** Join a gym or some other sports team, class, or group. Exercise increases levels of dopamine and endorphins in your body—the hormones that make you feel happy, confident, and relaxed—so you're not only doing something good for your body and health, but for your emotional well-being!
10. **Go out by yourself for a change.** Try going on an outing by yourself—you never know what kind of adventure you may have! Some things are easier to do by yourself, like attending a concert or a movie, but why not hit a new locale that you've always wanted to check out? You may meet some new friends, and it can boost your confidence having the courage to go out solo. If you don't feel comfortable or get bored, you can always leave. Just remember to exercise **extra caution!**

Schuetze, B. (Reviewed 2018). *Change the pace: Strike out on your own*. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

Building Healthy Sleep Habits



A consistent sleep schedule sets your body on a sleep-wake cycle that makes it easier to fall asleep at night.

With work pressure, family responsibilities, and the lure of social media and late-night TV, many people don't get the sleep their bodies need. Yet, sleep is as important to your health as physical activity and healthy eating:

- Sleep deficits can lead to errors at work, irritability, relationship problems, and depression—even to car accidents and life-threatening health problems. They also make it more difficult to maintain healthy eating and exercise habits.
- Healthy sleep habits, on the other hand, lead to greater creativity, better decisions, stronger social relationships, improved mood, more energy, and better overall health.

How to Improve Sleep Habits

- **Make sleep a priority in your life.** Recognize the pressures and temptations that are causing you to stay up too late.
- **Commit to a healthy sleep schedule.** Set a regular time for bed and for waking up. A consistent sleep schedule sets your body on a sleep-wake cycle that makes it easier to fall asleep at night.
- **Create a consistent wind-down routine as you get ready for sleep.** That might include a shower or bath, reading a few pages of a hard-copy book (for pleasure,

not work or study), meditation, or listening to calming music. It should include some time in dim light. Avoid screen use in the half hour before bedtime. The blue-spectrum light in phones, computers, and most tablet screens stimulates a hormone that can keep you awake.

- **Make your bedroom a haven for sleep.** Keep it dark, cool, and quiet.
- **Use your bed for sleep, not work or study,** so as you wind down in the evening your bed becomes a trigger for your healthy sleep habit.
- **Understand how caffeine, alcohol, and food affect your sleep:**
 - Limit caffeine in the hours before bedtime. Caffeine is a stimulant. It takes a few hours for its effects to wear off, and longer for people who are sensitive.
 - Avoid too much alcohol before bedtime. While alcohol may make you drowsy and cause you to fall asleep more quickly, it can also affect the quality and length of your sleep. Alcohol blocks rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which you need for the full restorative effect of sleep.

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Building Healthy Sleep Habits

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- Avoid fatty, spicy, or rich foods before bedtime. Eat your last meal of the day at least two or three hours before you plan to go to bed. A light snack in the evening is fine so you don't go to bed hungry.
- **Get some physical activity during the day**, but not right before bedtime. Exercise can greatly improve sleep quality.
- **Spend time in sunlight or natural light during the day, especially in the morning.** This helps set your natural sleep-wake cycle, making it easier to get to sleep at night. Open shades and blinds in the morning. Take a walk outside, or sit near a window.
- **If you have trouble getting to sleep, don't toss and turn in bed.** Get up and sit in low light in another room until you're sleepy. Do something relaxing, like listening to calm music or reading a book for pleasure. If you're ruminating on things you have to do or that are bothering you, write down a quick list and put it away to deal with tomorrow.
- **Seek help.** If these tips don't work for you and you're bothered by an ongoing lack of sleep, contact your doctor. Some behavior changes require professional help, and some sleep problems are signs of a medical concern.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

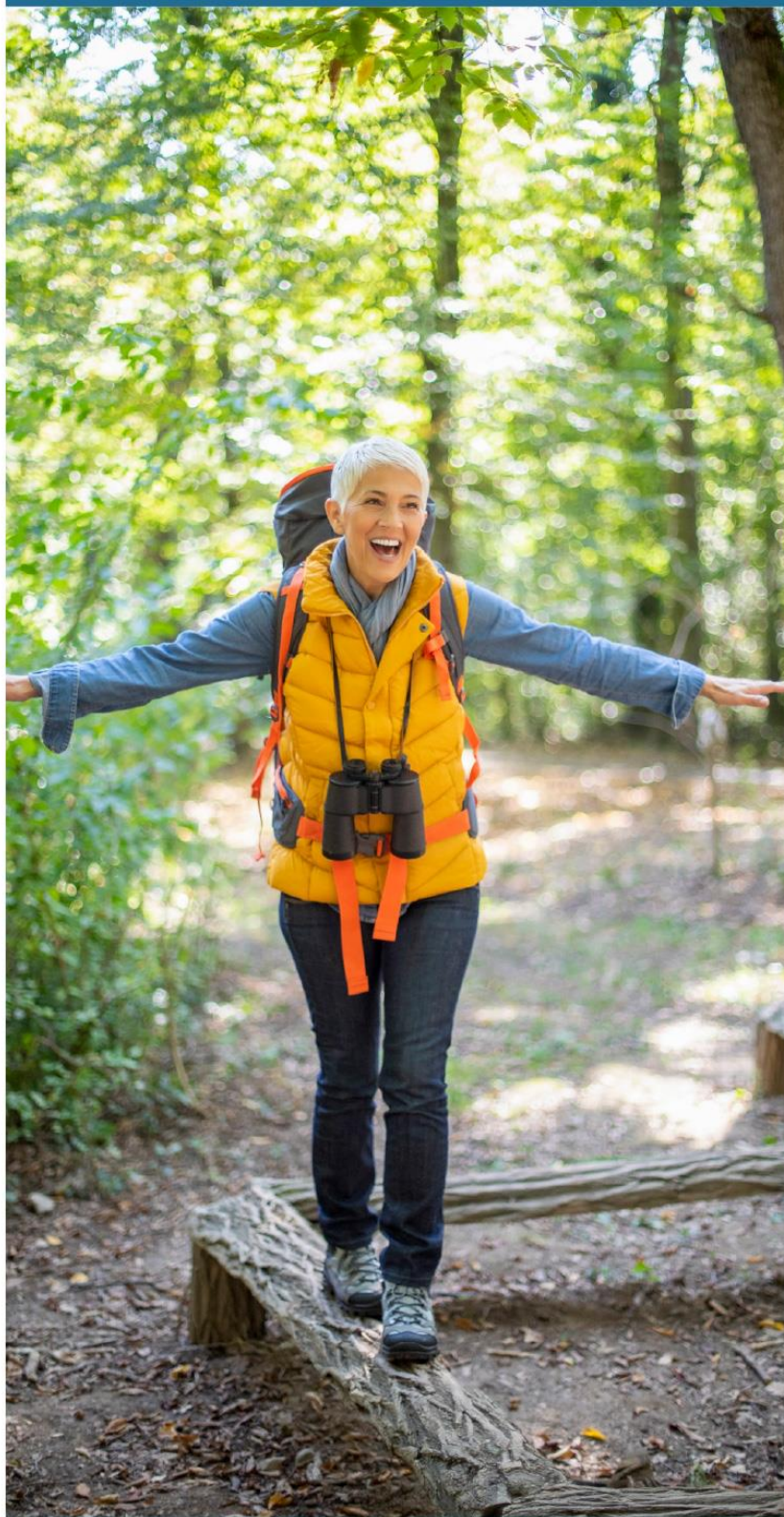
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Ways to Spend Healthful Time in Nature



Spending time in and connecting with nature can reduce your stress, brighten your mood, sharpen your thinking, and even boost your immune system. How can you work more time in nature into your busy schedule? And how can you make the most of your time in nature to gain valuable health and wellbeing benefits? Here are some ideas.

FIND THE GREEN SPACES NEAR YOU.

Look around your neighborhood for the green spaces—the places with grass, flowers, and trees where you can get a nature break. Even a small space, such as a rooftop garden or tiny park, can give your senses a chance to take in natural sights, sounds, and smells. Ask friends and neighbors for their favorite nearby places to take a walk or sit in nature. The map application on your phone can be a useful tool for discovering green spaces you may have overlooked.

TAKE SHORT NATURE BREAKS.

Make nearby green spaces part of your daily walk, lunch break, or wind-down at the end of the day. Go outdoors for a quick break from work, and enjoy the fresh air, sunshine, and greenery (if you're lucky enough to have some close by). Even 10 or 15 minutes in nature can calm and restore you.

VISIT A LARGER PARK, BOTANICAL GARDEN, OR ARBORETUM.

In addition to exploring your nearby green spaces, be a tourist in your own area and get to know the more significant natural attractions. Botanical gardens and arboreta offer an opportunity to relax in nature and to learn about plants and trees. Larger parks have trails you can explore. These larger natural spaces are also great places to spot wildlife, from butterflies to birds and mammals. Make a point of visiting these special places every few weeks.

USE YOUR SENSES TO TUNE IN TO NATURE.

When you spend time in nature, use your senses to connect with your surroundings. Look at the shapes of the trees and the range of colors and textures among the plants. Smell the flowers, the grass, and the fallen leaves. Listen to the running water, the birds, and the rustle of the leaves in the wind. Paying attention to your surroundings while you're in nature helps you let go of

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Ways to Spend Healthful Time in Nature (Contd.,)



the daily stresses and relax. The act of observing and sensing nature shifts your mind to a different way of thinking, one that is energizing and restorative. You'll also notice more and have a more interesting and enjoyable experience.

OBSERVE WILD ANIMALS.

Pay attention to the animals around you when you're out in nature—and when you're at home looking out the window. Consider setting up a bird feeder.

LEARN TO IDENTIFY NATURE.

Use a field guide to identify the birds you see on your daily walk. With practice (and help from the latest phone apps), you can learn to identify birds by their songs and calls, too. Learn the names of the trees, wildflowers, plants, and mushrooms you encounter. The attention to detail needed to make these identifications will sharpen your skills of observation and can heighten your appreciation of the nature around you.

LOOK UP AT THE SKY.

Find an open space to look up at the sky. On a day with interesting clouds, give yourself permission to watch and enjoy their ever-changing shapes. Notice the play of light on the clouds, especially at sunset or when the sun is low in the sky. On a clear night, look at the stars. Savor the beauty of a starlit sky, and feel the awe of considering the immense scale of the universe. Experiencing a feeling of awe while out in nature is associated with positive mental health benefits.

EXERCISE OUTDOORS.

Take your exercise routine into your neighborhood green spaces. Plan walking, running, or cycling routes along tree-lined streets, wooded trails, or next to bodies of water. Try

leaving the headphones at home, too, or turning them off when you're in the natural part of your exercise route. Do yoga and stretching exercises in the grass of your yard or a local park. Catch your breath after a run in the shade of a tree. Chances are, you'll enjoy the exercise more than you would in the gym, and you'll be breathing fresh air; soaking up vitamin D from the sun; and stimulating your senses with natural sights, sounds, and smells.

DRAW, PAINT, PHOTOGRAPH, OR RECORD NATURE.

Combine your observation of nature with a creative activity. Drawing, painting, photographing, or recording nature can push you to pay closer attention to your surroundings and make an even deeper connection with nature.

GARDEN.

Plant a garden, even a tiny one, such as a few plants in a window box. If you don't have enough space or the right conditions for a garden at home, look into the possibility of joining a community garden. Raising flowers, herbs, vegetables, and decorative plants is a wonderful way to connect with nature.

BRING NATURE INDOORS.

Grow houseplants. Cultivate a kitchen-counter herb garden. Bring flowering bulbs into bloom in the winter. Greenery and flowers in your home can contribute to a soothing indoor environment. Having a pet is another way to bring nature home, too, and gain some of the benefits of connecting with nature.

Morgan, H. (2021, November). *Ways to spend healthful time in nature* (C. Meeker & B. Schuette, Eds.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.



Building Social Bonds

CONNECTIONS THAT PROMOTE WELLBEING

Strong, healthy relationships are important throughout your life. Your social ties with family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and others impact your mental, emotional, and even physical wellbeing.

"We can't underestimate the power of a relationship in helping to promote wellbeing," says National Institutes of Health (NIH) psychologist and relationship expert Dr. Valerie Maholmes. Studies have found that having a variety of social relationships may help reduce stress and heart-related risks. Strong social ties are even linked to a longer life. On the other hand, loneliness and social isolation are linked to poorer health, depression, and increased risk of early death.¹

As a child you learn the social skills you need to form and maintain relationships with others, but you can learn ways to improve your relationships at any age.

NIH funds research to find out what causes unhealthy relationship behavior. Researchers have created community, family, and school-based programs to help people learn to have healthier relationships. These programs also help prevent abuse and violence toward others.

WHAT IS HEALTHY?

Every relationship exists on a spectrum from healthy to unhealthy to abusive. One sign of a healthy relationship is feeling good about yourself around your partner, family member, or friend. You feel safe talking about how you feel. You listen to each other. You feel valued, and you trust each other.

"It's important for people to recognize and be aware of any time where there is a situation in their relationship that doesn't feel right to them or that makes them feel less than who they are," Maholmes advises.

It's normal for people to disagree with each other, but conflicts shouldn't turn into personal attacks. In a healthy relationship, you can disagree without hurting each other and make decisions together.

"No relationship should be based on that power dynamic where someone is constantly putting the other partner down," Maholmes says.

If you grew up in a family with abuse, it may be hard as an adult to know what healthy is. Abuse may feel normal to you. There are several kinds of abuse, including physical, sexual, and verbal or emotional. Hurting with words, neglect, and withholding affection are examples of verbal or emotional abuse.

In an unhealthy or abusive relationship, your partner may blame you for feeling bad about something they did or said. They may tell you that you're too sensitive. Putting you down diminishes you and keeps them in control.

In a healthy relationship, however, if you tell your partner that something they said hurt your feelings, they feel bad for hurting you. They try not to do it again.

Abuse in an intimate relationship is called *domestic* or *intimate partner violence*. This type of violence involves a pattern of behaviors used by one person to maintain power and control over someone that they are married to, living with, or dating now or in the past. A pattern means it happens over and over.

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Building Social Bonds (Contd.,)

In an unhealthy or abusive relationship, you may not be allowed to spend time with family, friends, and others in your social network. "One of the signs that's really important in relationships where there is intimate partner violence is that the partner that is being abused is slowly being isolated from family, friends, and social networks," Maholmes says. "Those social networks are protective factors."

SOCIAL TIES PROTECT.

Studies have shown that certain factors seem to protect people from forming unhealthy relationships over their lifetime. The protection starts early in life. NIH-supported research has shown that the quality of an infant's emotional bond with a parent can have long-lasting positive or negative effects on the ability to develop healthy relationships.

"The early bond has implications that go well beyond the first years of life," says Dr. Grazyna Kochanska, an NIH-funded family relationships researcher at the University of Iowa. The goal of Kochanska's research projects is to understand the long-term effects of that early bond and to help children develop along positive pathways and avoid paths toward antisocial behaviors.²

A family that functions well is central to a child's development. Parents can help children learn how to listen, set appropriate boundaries, and resolve conflicts. Parents teach children by example how to consider other people's feelings and act in ways to benefit others.

Secure emotional bonds help children and teens develop trust and self-esteem. They can then venture out of the family to form other social connections, like healthy friendships. In turn, healthy friendships reduce the risk of a child becoming emotionally distressed or engaging in antisocial behaviors.

On the other hand, having an unhealthy relationship in the family, including neglect and abuse, puts a child at risk for future unhealthy relationships.

"One caring adult can make a huge difference in the life of kids whose family structures may not be ideal or whose early life is characterized by abuse and neglect," says Dr. Jennie Noll of the Center for Healthy Children at Pennsylvania State University. "That caring adult could be an older sibling, or a parent, or someone else in the family, a teacher—the kind of people who have a large influence in communicating to the child that they matter and that they're safe, and that they have a place to go when they are needing extra support."^{3,4}

Healthy friendships and activities outside of the home or classroom can play protective roles during childhood, too. In fact, everyone in a community can help support the development of healthy connections. Adults can serve as good role models for children, whether the children are their own or those they choose to mentor.

HELPING AND GETTING HELP

At any age, your relationships matter. Having healthy relationships with others starts with liking yourself. Learn what makes you happy. Treat yourself well. Know that you deserve to be treated well by others.

Having an unhealthy or abusive relationship can really hurt. The connection may be good some of the time. You may love and need the person who hurts you. After being abused, you may feel you don't deserve to be in a healthy, loving relationship.

With help, you can work on your relationship. Sometimes in an abusive relationship, you may be advised to get out. Either way, others can help.

If you or a friend needs help with an unhealthy relationship, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at <https://www.thehotline.org> or 800-799-SAFE. If you know a child who may need help, find resources at the Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov>.

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Building Social Bonds (Contd.,)

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE IN AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

- Let them know that you're worried about them.
- Listen without judging or blaming.
- Tell them that it's not their fault.
- Offer to go with them to talk to someone who can help.
- Visit <https://www.thehotline.org> for more tips on how to help.

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