We all know that having friends or being in a romantic relationship makes us feel good emotionally. But did you know that good relationships can help you to maintain good physical health too?

Research shows that:

- Having a wide circle of friends can make you recover from illness faster.
- Being touched by friends often can lower stress levels, even if the touch is as brief as a pat on the back.
- Having a good support system can mean you live longer.
- People who have supportive relationships are less likely to have mental health problems.

With all these benefits, both physical and emotional, it obviously makes sense to take the time to invest in building healthy relationships. Here are some suggestions that can help. The tips given here can be applied to any relationship - romantic, family, or "just friends".

❖ Healthy relationships don't just happen automatically. First, we have to be open to having a relationship and then we have to be willing to **take the time** and energy to work on it. Notice that this is true even in a family setting. The sibling or cousin we are closest to is likely to be the one that at some point we chose to spend most time with.

❖ In healthy relationships people have mastered the skills of **good communication**. You don't have to be born a good communicator. It is a skill that can be learnt. So practice listening without interrupting. Listen for feelings as well as facts and respond to the feelings also. Ask appropriate questions (but don't cross-examine the person). Share information about yourself (but not so much that the other person does not get their turn).

❖ In healthy relationships people are **trustworthy.** If you make a promise be sure to keep it. If something changes so you can't do what you said, then be sure to inform the other person as soon as possible.

❖ In healthy relationships people recognise that disagreements are inevitable and so they learn suitable ways to handle them. This involves learning to **attack the problem,** not the person. Staying focused on the issue at hand makes it possible to resolve the problem. Focusing on your friends' faults and blaming them only tends to make them more defensive. Being willing to

apologize when you are wrong is also important. Repeated apologies for the same action can wear thin however. If you truly believe that your behaviour is problematic then you need to work to bring about the necessary changes.

❖ **Showing affection** is important in healthy relationships. This can be done in simple ways - sending a birthday card (real or virtual), buying lunch for your friend, loaning a book,

giving a hug - the possibilities are endless. Make sure there is a balance; be open to receive not just give. Remember too that showing non sexual affection in romantic relationships is an important ingredient in keeping partners from feeling used.

- ❖ In healthy relationships you are **free to be yourself**. Relationships where you have to change too much to suit the other person or where you have to spend lots of energy wondering if you are pleasing your friend are just too taxing to be worthwhile long-term.
- ❖ In healthy relationships we acknowledge that **change is inevitable.** Hopefully the changes we make will enhance and deepen the relationship, but there are times when these changes will weaken the relationship. It is important to recognize when a relationship has changed in such a way that it is no longer healthy. We need to protect ourselves from unhealthy

relationships. Sometimes this will mean that we can no longer have regular contact with people with whom we had previously had a good relationship. If this happens it is important not to let ourselves become bitter. Work at forgiving the person who hurt us. Turn to other supportive relationships for help at those difficult times. Remain open to developing other new, healthy relationships.

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HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS
IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH