

Supporting Healthy Friendships

This tip sheet for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) accompanies the presentation “Supporting Healthy Friendships.”

Why Are Friendships Important?

Good friends can help you celebrate good times and support you during bad times. Friendships can help by:

- Improving your sense of belonging and purpose
- Boosting your feelings of happiness and reducing your stress
- Increasing your self-confidence and self-worth
- Helping you cope with traumas, such as a serious illness, job loss or the death of a loved one
- Encouraging you to change or avoid unhealthy lifestyle habits, such as excessive drinking or lack of exercise



Friends are there for each other, hopefully over a long period of time. The individuals you support may need your assistance to maintain friendships that will last over time.

Making friends and strengthening existing friendships can encourage better physical and mental health, which are well worth the effort. People need only a few very close friends to help them get through life’s challenges. Friends help each other to lead fuller and more enjoyable lives. When people have friends, everything is better!

Friendships and the Individuals We Support

As support staff, you may develop a close relationship with someone you support. It is important to remember that over time, your job can change. At some point, you may no longer be there for that person.

An important part of your job is to help the individuals you support make friendships that will last over time. This helps people lead much fuller and more enjoyable lives. When they have friends and family in their lives, everyone wins!

What Is a Healthy Friendship?

DSPs can assist individuals they support to make friends by talking about what healthy friendships looks like:

- A true friend stays connected
- A true friend listens to your concerns
- A true friend is there for you during ups and downs



Talk about what a real friend looks like, sounds like, and acts like.

For example, friends listen to each other. They also show empathy and understanding when needed. They say nice things to each other. All these things serve to build trust and strengthen a friendship.

Help individuals understand what a healthy friendship means.

Friends make us feel happy, safe, and supported. As in any relationship, disagreements can happen. In healthy friendships, people can work things out.

Ongoing feelings of sadness, anger, or fear may be a sign of an unhealthy friendship.

Make sure individuals know where to go and who to talk to when they have these feelings.

Additional Resources:

- Healthy lifestyle and adult health: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/friendships/art-20044860>
- Friendships in People with Intellectual Disabilities: https://shriver.umassmed.edu/sites/shriver.umassmed.edu/files/QINA%20Friendship_final_web2.pdf
- Making Friends Where You Live – Friendship Toolkit: <http://thearcofmass.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/FRIENDSHIP-TOOLKIT-WHERE-YOU-LIVE-2018-online.pdf>