




get
closer

chron

*RESEARCH SHOWS STRONG RELATIONSHIPS = BETTER
HEALTH. IT'S THAT SIMPLE. SO HERE ARE 12 CONSCIOUS
(AND EASY!) WAYS TO FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO
ALL THE PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE—FROM YOUR SPOUSE TO
YOUR SISTER TO THE STRANGER YOU MEET AT
THE GROCERY STORE.*



A photograph of a woman and a young girl sitting in front of a bookshelf. The woman, with dark hair, is wearing a grey cardigan over a yellow polka-dot top. She is smiling and clapping her hands. The girl, with light brown hair, is wearing an orange cardigan over a red top and white pants. She is also smiling and clapping her hands. The background is a bookshelf filled with books.

by **Leslie Goldman** *photography by* **Stephanie Rausser**

*Hanging out with a
kid will give your adult
relationships a boost, too.*



THE RESEARCH IS CLEAR:

Healthy relationships lead to good health. It's that simple. || "Over and over, studies show that

having close ties with friends, siblings and partners not only makes us feel good, but also boosts our confidence, reduces our chances of depression and can even help us live longer," says Nicholas A. Christakis, M.D., Ph.D., professor of sociology at Yale University and co-author of *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* (Back Bay Books). In other words, it takes a village to raise ... you. || To boost your buddy system, we polled the experts and collected a dozen tips to help fortify your friendships, enhance your romantic connections, strengthen your bond with your mom and more.

1} Kiss for longer than it takes to sneeze

➔ In the good old days, you and your love would make out for hours. Now, there's a good chance you greet your partner with a peck—or kiss your kids or dog first! "Kissing is a barometer of passion," says NYC-based acupuncturist Jill Blakeway, L.Ac., author of *Sex Again: Recharging Your Libido* (Workman). "When passion takes a backseat, relationships lose their vibrancy." Blakeway recommends smooching for longer than it takes to sneeze, which gives you enough time to be fully present in the moment, increasing intimacy and connection. A sweet side effect: Research shows couples who kiss more have lower cholesterol levels.

2} Spread some love with a plucky post

➔ If your brother's roommate's girlfriend is having an awesome day, you're gonna feel groovy, too: A University of California, San Diego study showed that happiness can spread among friends or even acquaintances on social networks up to three degrees. (Every cheery friend ups your happiness odds by 9 percent, while a sad pal drops it by 7 percent.) At play is a phenomenon called emotional contagion—the tendency of humans to copy the emotions of those to whom they are connected. "Our mental health

depends on the mental health of those around us," Christakis says. "It's a bummer to be surrounded by depressed people." Don't forget to show those pearlies in your profile pic: People who smile on Facebook are also generally more likely to be friends with other smilers.

3} Babysit for an afternoon

➔ Sure, you might get spit-up on your shirt or find a half-eaten chicken nugget in your purse, but spending some quality time with kids can impact your various grown-up relationships. "Children have Ph.D.s in play, and their lack of inhibition is contagious," says *Natural Health* Advisory Board member Judith Orloff, M.D., an integrative psychiatrist and author of *Positive Energy: 10 Extraordinary Prescriptions for Transforming Fatigue, Stress, and Fear into Vibrance, Strength, and Love* (Three Rivers Press). "It makes you more easygoing and appreciative of the little things in life," and you can then carry that relaxed attitude and flexibility into your romance, friendships and family interactions. Orloff notes it does need to be a child you feel positively about, so invite your favorite niece over for an afternoon tea party. You could also volunteer for a kid-friendly cause or just hang out at a park and watch some toddlers squeal with delight as they swing and slide.

4} Watch a rerun of 30 Rock with your BFF

➔ Or *Modern Family*, *Seinfeld* or anything that makes you both crack up. "We absorb funniness by osmosis," says Orloff. "Hearty laughs spread positive vibes, which gets your endorphins flowing and promotes bonding." It may also help your immune system stay happy: Loma Linda University researcher Lee Berk, Dr.P.H., showed that watching a funny video boosted the production of immune cells by 19 percent. Other ways to get your ha ha on: See a funny play or hit up a comedy club with a partner, pal or your pop.

5} Sleep naked

➔ Oxytocin, that dreamy-feeling bonding hormone, flows freely when we first fall for someone, giving us that heady sensation of being in love, explains Christina Steinorth, M.A., M.F.T., an integrative psychotherapist in Santa Barbara, Calif., and author of *Cue Cards for Life: Thoughtful Tips for Better Relationships* (Hunter House). You can get that delicious feeling back with skin-to-skin contact, which triggers your brain to release more oxytocin. "The more of you that is exposed, the better," Steinorth says. Spooning in the buff may even help you

A woman with dark hair, wearing a grey cardigan over a yellow polka-dot top, is laughing heartily while holding a young girl. The girl, with blonde hair, is wearing a red cardigan and white pants with red socks. She is also laughing and has her eyes closed. They are sitting in front of a bookshelf filled with books. The woman is wearing a grey cardigan and a yellow polka-dot top. The girl is wearing a red cardigan and white pants with red socks. They are both laughing and looking upwards. The background is a bookshelf filled with books.

*Oxytocin boosts bonding
in all your most important
relationships.*



live longer: A University of North Carolina study found that women who frequently hugged their partner had lower blood pressure, perhaps due to elevated oxytocin levels, and lower blood pressure may decrease risk of heart disease. Shed the PJs and keep the spark (and each other) alive.

6} Take “girls’ night out” literally

➔ Nature’s impact on our health is well known: People who live near parks have lower stress hormone levels, and kids with attention deficit disorder score higher on cognitive tests after walking through arboretums. Why not use your favorite green space to improve the health of your friendships, too? “Walk through a farmers market rather than meeting at a coffee shop,” Steinorth suggests, or sign up for a charity walk together instead of dinner at your go-to neighborhood spot. This works with spouses and family, as well. “These types of interactive experiences give you fond memories, so when you have tough times, you can remember, ‘Hey, I used to have good times with this person, like when we took that long jog along the beach.’”

7} Touch a stranger

➔ Diana Spechler, 34, was grocery shopping in a Trader Joe’s in New York City when she accidentally stepped on the back of a stranger’s shoe. The woman spun around, armed with a dirty look. But Spechler was armed with something stronger: a kind touch. “I gently squeezed her wrist and said, ‘I’m so sorry,’” she recalls. “As soon as I touched her, her anger melted away and she said, ‘No problem.’ She wanted to connect. We all want that.”

Oxytocin to the rescue again. Even a gentle stroke can trip the hormone switch, enhancing your relationship with everyone from fellow grocery shoppers to siblings and spouses. In one study, participants received either oxytocin or a placebo and were then asked to split a sum of money with a stranger; those given oxytocin offered 80 percent

more money compared to the placebo group.

Spechler now makes a habit of literally reaching out to strangers: “It makes me feel more compassionate toward them and more engaged in the human experience,” she says. “We’re all connected. We’re all going through basically the same thing—daily life. So why not acknowledge that with a touch and a smile?”

8} Call him “Loverboy”

➔ Pet names have been around since Adam called Eve “Red Delicious.” When shared by lovers, they’re shorthand for “I know you in a way that no one else does,” says Carol Bruess, Ph.D., a professor of family studies and communication at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn. While interviewing couples for her book, *What Happy Couples Do: Belly Button Fuzz & Bare-Chested Hugs—The Loving Little Rituals of Romance* (Fairview Press), Bruess found that the more pet names or made-up words a couple used, the higher their marital satisfaction. “Nicknames create your own mini culture,” she says. Goofy euphemisms for sex (“Time for ice cream”) and covert communications (scratching your neck means “Let’s go NOW”) count, too.

9} Open yourself up—even if it’s scary

➔ Think about something in your past that you’re truly not proud of—something that feels so embarrassing or shameful, you’ve never revealed it to anyone. Now, find someone close to you and spill your guts. “When you suppress your secret, it forms a pus pocket of bad energy that affects not only you, but those around you,” says Michael Finkelstein, M.D., founder of SunRaven Center for Holistic and Skillful Living in Bedford, N.Y., and author of *77 Questions for Skillful Living: A New Path to Extraordinary Health* (William Morrow). “Letting it out not only relieves your own tension, but also fosters intimacy between the two of you and makes you feel more approachable.”





*Touching and staying
in touch has been shown to
keep your heart happy.*

Emily Shaules, a 37-year-old actress in Asheville, N.C., put this tip into practice early in her relationship with her now-boyfriend when she bared all about her divorce and past health issues. "I used to reveal things slowly to potential partners," Shaules says, "but this time, I confessed all of the things I thought were my deepest, darkest secrets all at once. And with each one, he said, 'Thank you for sharing that. You are so brave.'" Ripping off her emotional Band-Aid prompted her beau to disclose his own secrets, too ... and he moved in two months later.

10} *Ask for forgiveness*

➔ You messed up and you know it. Ask for forgiveness and make it short and simple. "Own your infraction," Steinorth says. "Say, 'This is what I did. I'm sorry. Will you please forgive me?' It shows that you have a sincere desire to make things right rather than sweeping them under the rug." That honesty can ultimately wind up bolstering your relationship. The act of forgiving can also lower blood pressure and stress, and enhance sleep quality and immunity; Steinorth says the same results may come from asking for absolution.

Don't follow up your apology with "but" ("I'm sorry I stood you up for yoga, but my boss made me stay late"); you're either sorry or you're not. Then promise to not do it again, and live up to that promise. Most relationships can rebound when apologies are sincere, Steinorth notes.

11} *Manage a high-maintenance friend*

➔ Your drama-queen friend from college may be a handful, but she's a fun handful. Orloff says it is possible to manage the theatrics of a high-maintenance buddy by setting clear boundaries. Let's say you have a friend who always plays the victim, but you still adore her. In a compassionate way, tell her, "I love you, but unless you want to start talking about solutions, I can only listen for a few minutes." If she is forever complaining about being overweight, you might try, "I think you look wonderful, but I hear you talking a lot about needing to lose weight. Let's brainstorm some ways to help you get started. Otherwise, we need to move on." Orloff says your insecure/melodramatic/temperamental comrade might not even be aware of how exhausting she is, so you'll be helping her gain some self-insight, too.

12} *Call your mother*

➔ About 85 percent of grown women report they enjoy a good relationship with their mom, according to a Pennsylvania State University study. But plenty of daughters complain that their mothers like to butt into their personal lives. The fix? Pick up the phone, Steinorth says. "When you don't keep in close contact, your mother feels like she doesn't know what's going on in your life and may ask what you interpret as invasive questions. Calling her makes her feel connected." No need to jump through hoops; just once or twice a week should do the trick. ✕

Leslie Goldman is a health writer based in Chicago.

*LAUGHTER, CONNECTION,
LOVE, ATTRACTION — THEY
ALL ARE CONNECTED
TO HORMONES THAT ARE
BENEFICIAL TO YOUR HEALTH.*

