5 Kinds of Relationships and What Each One Needs, According to Therapists

7 MIN READ

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Here’s how to nourish your relationships intelligently.

VO2 max, balance, grip strength: these are the metrics we optimize and use to predict how long and how well we’ll live. But focus too narrowly on what the body tells us, and you’ll forget about another consequential aspect of longevity: the relationships that sustain us.

Relational capacity is the ability to build, nurture, and draw meaning from the connections in our lives. It’s not a soft skill or a social nicety. It’s a core competency. One that shapes mental health, emotional resilience, and even physical endurance in ways that rival anything measured in a lab or on a track.

By that measure, many of us are running on empty. Our connections exist, but they commonly lack the specific ingredients that give them real power. To find out what’s missing, we spoke with leading therapists and psychologists working across the full relational spectrum.

What we found: each type of relationship — with a partner, a community, a family member, a friend, and ultimately with yourself — has one precise, frequently overlooked element that, once recognized and cultivated, doesn’t just strengthen the bond. It transforms it.

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Romantic Relationships: The Real

Foundation is Emotional Safety

Here's an exercise: close your eyes, and recall the moment from your week that casts you in the least flattering light. An instance of embarrassment or short-temperedness, for example. Would you feel comfortable sharing that side of yourself with your partner?

Ramiro Castano, LMFT, founder of **Find Your Relationship Counseling** in Littleton, Colorado, says that the specific feature most worth cultivating in a romantic partnership is not romance, communication, or even compatibility — though these things certainly matter.

It's emotional safety. Confidence that your partner won't reject you for the mistakes you make, the baggage you carry, or the personality traits still under construction.

"Emotional safety is the sense that you matter to your partner. That your struggles will be taken seriously. That you can bring something difficult, something embarrassing, something painful, and know in your bones that it won't be dismissed or used against you," Castano explains. The end effect: "Knowing that your partner really 'gets' you more than anyone else does."

When that safety is present, he says, the relationship becomes a genuine buffer against everything else life throws at you. "When it erodes — and it erodes naturally over time without deliberate attention — the relationship quietly becomes another source of stress rather than relief from it," he adds.

This is crucial. After counseling couples for 15 years, Castano says he believes that "the quality of a person's primary romantic relationship is the single greatest predictor of their overall mental and emotional wellbeing. Not their diet, not their exercise routine, not their social circle. Their relationship," he says.

Research backs it: Marital satisfaction *does* appear to predict happiness, and can even mitigate genetic risk of heritable mental health conditions.

"People in genuinely connected, secure partnerships live longer, recover from illness

faster, experience lower rates of depression and anxiety, and report higher overall life satisfaction," Castano adds. "The emotional state of a relationship has a ripple effect on all aspects of an individual's life, for better or worse."

So yes, strive for self improvement. Try to be kind, honest, and accountable. But the deepest partnerships, the ones that nourish you most, allow you to bring your *whole* self. Flaws and all.

How to Get Real With Your Partner

When couples take inventory of their relationship, they tend to reflect primarily on feelings. Castano recommends thinking about actions, too, accounting for impact, not just intent.

While you may feel more acutely aware of what your partner is or isn't doing or saying, he suggests turning the spotlight on your own contributions: "What am I doing to make things safer for my partner in this relationship?"

"That question, taken seriously and returned to regularly, is what keeps someone aware of the impact they are having on their partner with everything they say and do," he tells Super Age. "It's part of the maintenance and preventative work that most people in relationships skip until they need the repair."

Community Relationships: Belonging Is the Key

In generations past, people's identities and social ties were deeply shaped by the clubs, churches, and unions they were a part of. Today, those ties have largely frayed as people seek their own informal communities outside of organized institutions.

Dr. **Shawna Gann**, a business psychologist and executive coach, argues that something important gets lost when we overlook these kinds of membership-based

relationships found in workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, or religious institutions. And, she notes, we may have even forgotten how to tend to the community-level relationships we *do* have left.

“These are places where people assume everyone naturally belongs, just because they are there. But lots of folks never actually receive the signal that *confirms* their belonging,” she tells Super Age. Uncomfortable in that ambiguity, people default to polite but hollow conversation in these types of settings, which ultimately means missing out on true connection.

According to psychologist **Dakari Quimby**, MA, PhD, not all community ties necessarily require an intense emotional investment. What they *do* require is mutual care, and an “intentional commitment to routine contact, regular engagement in ‘small-disclosure’ experiences to build mutual trust… and mutually enjoyable shared-activities versus only conversing.”

If the relationship spectrum runs from indifference at one end to deep investment at the other, Dr. Gann suggests another possible middle ground: generosity.

“There is a willingness to give something of yourself, whether that’s your time, your attention, your stories, sitting through a difficult conversation even though it is taxing, or even giving someone the benefit of the doubt because you trust them. We would be a lot less lonely if we could be a lot more generous with one another.”

Cultivate Community

Dr. Gann suggests four ways to cultivate relationships in your existing communities. In her words:

1. Assess your willingness to connect, and your reasoning for doing so: Are you only giving of yourself because you think you have to (think customer service, or someone’s watching and you feel compelled)? Or are you interested in building community in this space?

2. If you do want to build bridges to belonging, ask yourself what you’re willing to

give. What would it feel like to share something about your background that you hold a little closer to you? Can you take the time to find out where you connect beyond the typical expectations of the setting?

3. Consider what actions would signal actual membership to a group. In practice, this could mean investing energy in a coworker that needs some mentorship, even though you are busy. Having lunch with someone of a completely different background than you. Organizing community support for someone who needs it.

4. Skip the scripted conversations. A good place to start: Stop defaulting to a half-hearted “How are you?” when you greet someone. If you’re willing to cultivate connection, ask questions with answers you really want to know (If that’s “How are you?” make your sincerity clear, and be ready for a real response). Try to be generous with your time and attention.

Familial Relationships: “Shared Repair” Heals and Restores

Todd Stevens, Founder and Lead Therapist at Renovation Marriage, spends his days counseling couples through tough times, but his advice applies to any complex familial relationship. This can be with a spouse, parent, child, or anyone else in your innermost circle, which tends to get taken for granted.

“Too often, the relationship is treated like a houseplant that takes care of itself, until it doesn’t,” he tells Super Age. When a fight or conflict arises, that same passivity can leave things unresolved, corroding the bond and compounding over time.

That’s why, he says, the familial relationships that thrive are the ones in which everyone is committed to repair after conflict — a skill that’s teachable but rarely taught: “Most people never learn because their parents never modeled it. Most of us watched our parents fight. Very few of us watched our parents actually finish the fight

well," he notes.

Three Actionable Steps, from Stevens:

1. Schedule one 20-minute weekly check-in with no agenda except each other. Phone down, eye contact, two questions: What was hardest about your week? What did I do that landed well? "Couples who do this for six months almost always describe the change as feeling married again," he notes.

2. Make a specific repair statement after every conflict, he suggests, noting that a generic "sorry" rarely gives closure. "What lands is a sentence that names what you did and what it cost the other person: 'I dismissed you in front of the kids tonight. That was unfair, and I imagine it stung.' Specificity is what makes a repair believable," he says.

3. Stop keeping score. The healthiest families don't focus on who did more, who was right last time, who started it. You can acknowledge the patterns that need repair without picking each other apart or moving backwards. Focus on the big picture, rather than airing minor grievances — and consider saving the conversation for when tempers aren't flaring. "The ones who keep score keep losing," Stevens notes.

Friendships: Variety Is What Helps Us Grow

Augusto Blanco, a **men's psychologist** and couple's therapist, says that because we tend to gravitate toward the familiar, we often find ourselves in homogeneous groups divided by age, race, gender, or finances.

"As humans, we thrive with diversity, but one of the biggest mistakes I see people making is building their entire social world around just one type of connection or one type of person," Blanco tells Super Age. "Diverse relationships make us more informed, adaptable, and emotionally resilient — giving us perspective, emotional

grounding, practical advice, and access to experiences we haven't yet had," he adds.

Basing your relationships less around circumstantial similarities and more on how you show up for one another can also elevate your overall quality of relationships, he suggests: "The healthiest relationships are the ones where both people actively contribute, want good things for each other, and create an environment where growth feels safer instead of more dangerous," Blanco says.

Shake Up Your Circle

Quimby suggests one simple way that you can broaden your friendships beyond your typical pool: by actively cultivating the intergenerational relationships in your life.

"Intergenerational relationships (i.e., meaningful interactions between older and younger adults) have been found to reduce feelings of loneliness and depression while increasing perceptions of purpose for all parties involved. Additionally, they can serve as a mechanism to combat 'age-segregation,' which has recently been associated with increased social isolation," he tells Super Age.

The key here is to avoid one common pattern, which creates an imbalance (and a discomfort): one-way, unsolicited advice. Instead, try to view the relationship as a form of "reciprocal" mentoring and exchange, which Quimby says provides significant benefits for both generations.

In practice, this looks like going beyond career advice from the older party, or tech tips from the younger. Share your real perspectives, the music you love. Ask the questions your same-age friends don't have the answers to. You may find an unexpectedly rich connection.

Your Relationship With Yourself: Attunement Is Essential

One of the most important relationships to tend to is the one you have with yourself. Foundational to that relationship is honest attunement to your own thoughts, needs, and desires.

“A lot of the people that I work with in therapy have spent their entire lives people-pleasing, abandoning their own needs and wants, reading the room before seeing how they feel internally, or putting everyone else’s needs first,” says clinical counselor **Bailey Taylor**, MS, LCPC. “It’s hard to access what they actually want, need, or feel, because they’re so used to over-extending or over-functioning for others, and that role got praised.”

Taylor explains that this pattern usually starts in the first few years of life, shaped by early family dynamics and caregivers. But eventually, what starts as an adaptation to keep others comfortable becomes personality-wide self-abandonment. Unaddressed, this can trickle out to all of your other relationships.

“It’s hard to create and maintain genuine connection without the vulnerability required of naming our preferences, boundaries, and what we actually want in relationships. Our nervous systems are wired for real connection, and when there’s a big gap between who you actually are and who you’re showing up as, that stress accumulates and can lead to your body forcing you to slow down,” she tells Super Age. “The exhaustion of managing everyone else’s emotions can lead to increased cortisol levels and a chronically active nervous system.”

Try the Head-Heart-Core Practice

We recently **shared an excerpt** from Erin Weed’s book, ***Just One Word: The Surprisingly Simple Method to Discover Your Purpose and Unleash Your Power***. In it, she shared her three step practice for connecting with people by cultivating your own authenticity. All it takes is sharing three truths:

1. What you think (Head)
2. What you feel (Heart)

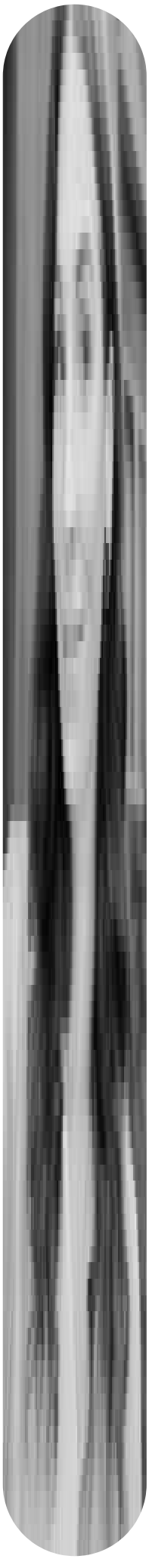
3 What you want (Core)

Deceptively simple, this strategy builds two things at once: inner clarity about your own emotions, and the words to share them with others. That combination is one of the most powerful tools for human connection, and something that can strengthen all of the relationships in your life.

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