

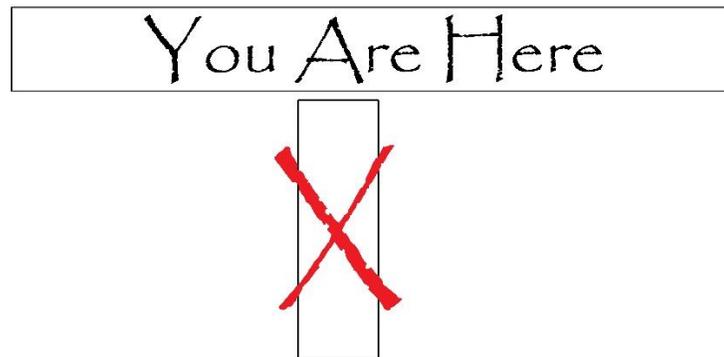


Social Support

Many years of research support the fact that even the most introverted person needs to have a few different sources of social support. However, developing lasting, satisfying social connections can be difficult for a variety of reasons including time, energy, not knowing where to find solid people, feeling awkward approaching others, or going on the mistaken belief that it's possible to get all of your support needs by one person (e.g., partner, parent, friend, etc). **Having appropriate social connections is a "have to have," not a "nice to have" in terms of optimizing psychological well-being, especially during times of stress or transition.**

Going It Alone

Why even go through the hassle of developing more friends? Take a look at this graphic:



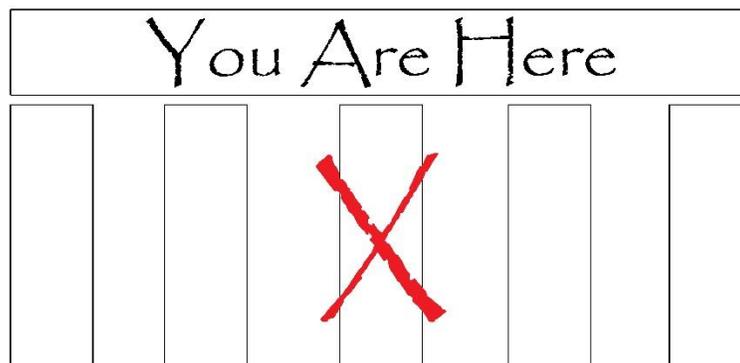
The problem is that if you have only one real source of support, you're likely to:

- Feel isolated
- Risk burning out the one person who supports you
- At some level, resent that person for not being able to meet all of your needs

Most importantly, **if something happens to your sole column of support, you fall hard!**

Diversifying Your Social Network

You don't need a zillion best friends, but **you do need at least four supportive people other than a romantic partner or your family**. *A table needs four legs to have stability, and you need four supportive buddies for the same reason.* In the same way that common advice is to diversify your financial portfolio in order to minimize risk (e.g., If stocks are down, bonds are up; if your house burns down, you have savings in the bank, etc.), **you need to develop several different sources of connection in your social network so that if something happens to one or more of them, you will still have stability and support during tough times:**





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Phone: (858) 609-1549
Fax: (858) 380-4636
www.menexcel.com

6540 Lusk Blvd., Suite C234
San Diego, CA 92121-2768
coordinator@menexcel.com

Changing How - and How Often - You Communicate

If meeting new people and putting in the effort to stay connected with them over time were easy, you would already have been doing it. One relatively simple way to start the process is to think of people who you already know, and who you already communicate with in some way. Without having to even change what you communicate with her/him about, you can take an initial step of:

1. Increasing the **frequency** of communication – so if you text or Facebook message once per month, be proactive about doing it twice per month.
2. Stepping up the **synchronicity** of communication – meaning that you change the medium to make it more immediate. If you only email with the person, start sending text messages. If you only text, pick up the phone sometimes. ****Note that if your reaction here is, “No way, I hate the phone because I prefer to talk in person, it’s awkward, nobody makes calls anymore, my dog ate my contacts, etc.” then you are most likely engaging in anxiety-driven avoidance which is holding you back from getting more out of your friendships.**

A lot of times, simply by communicating more frequently and immediately, you can have better connections.

Stepping Up What You Communicate

Men tend to get to know each through indirect communications in which they talk to each other not about themselves, but rather about some external topic such as work, a game, sports, a project, a mutual acquaintance, a TV show, etc. In this way, Guy A gauges his fit with Guy B largely by how much he agrees or disagrees with what Guy B says about these topics. Over time, as the two guys become closer, that closeness can be demonstrated by the topics they discuss being less indirect, meaning that they talk more directly about themselves, what’s important to them, and even some areas of difficulty they’re experiencing.

Fit in Relationships

Not all friendships are equal, and **the most straightforward way to gauge if a relationship is working is by taking a concrete look at the fit for both people involved.** Briefly, the fit in any relationship (friendships, romance, family, colleagues, etc.) is evidenced by the extent to which each person can get her/his needs met in that relationship. It’s important to **remember that NO ONE RELATIONSHIP CAN MEET ALL OF YOUR NEEDS, so you need to diversify your sources.** If you have a clear sense of what your own needs are (e.g., the other person responds promptly when you contact her/him, keeps your secrets, helps out when you’re in a tough patch, etc), and some understanding of what the other person is looking for, you can best gauge if the relationship is a fit. Don’t try to force it – if it’s not a fit, you’ll probably be able to feel it. Try to figure out where the disconnect is, accept the limitation on the relationship with that person, and then move on to connect with someone else who’s a better fit. There’s no failing or succeeding in relationships – they either fit, or they don’t.

Men commonly use justifications like, “pity party,” “dirty laundry,” “looking weak,” “none of their business,” “it won’t help,” “it’s been too long, so it’ll be awkward to reach out now” or “they won’t get it” to avoid talking with supportive people in their lives. The reality is that you usually feel better after talking about what’s bothering you - and it actually takes more strength to risk talking than it does to let anxiety drive avoidance and “stuffing it.”

One final important point to keep in mind is that the more you develop supportive relationships, the more chances you’ll have to be there and support others when they hit inevitable tough patches in life.