

MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

Fostering Belonging
for Self and Others



**Student
Well-Being**

MCDONALD CENTER

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MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

Fostering Belonging for Self and Others

A sense of belonging plays a crucial and powerful role in individual and community flourishing and well-being. Because building community and meaningful relationships is something most of us struggle with from time to time, belonging is something that we can always work on - fostering it for ourselves and others.

This guide is designed to provide you with context for and about belonging, opportunities to reflect on your own experiences with belonging, and tips and activities that can support and cultivate more connection and belonging in your life and your community.



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BELONGING IS...

...the feeling of being a part of a group that values, respects, and cares for us—
a feeling that we can all cultivate in even the smallest corners of social life.

A basic human need.

A genuine sense of being known, heard, and valued.

Acceptance, inclusion, and identity.

Beyond being welcoming.

A fundamental right.

Policies, programs, and practices.

BELONGING MATTERS.

Belonging is essential for well-being, impacting physical and mental health, personal development, social cohesion, and overall quality of life. Despite our commitment to an inclusive "Notre Dame Family," many students feel they don't belong. Most students report feeling lonely and lacking companionship at least some of the time. Reflecting upon your own experiences of belonging uncertainty can provide insight into which experiences triggered doubts and which helped you feel a sense of belonging.

REFLECT

Write about a time you felt a strong sense of belonging with a group.

What elements of that experience contributed to your sense of belonging?

How can you recreate those elements elsewhere? For yourself? For others?

BELONGING UNCERTAINTY

Belonging uncertainty involves anxiety or doubt about one's place and acceptance within a group, especially in new environments like college. It can be triggered by:

- Observing others who seem more successful or integrated.
- Encountering unfamiliar norms and expectations.
- Experiencing criticism, exclusion, or rejection.
- Being aware of individual differences from the majority (racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, etc.).

REFLECT

Write about a time you felt uncertain about your acceptance in a group.

How did belonging uncertainty impact you in that instance?

Were you able to overcome belonging uncertainty in that instance? If so, how?

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF BELONGING

Conformity perpetuates belonging uncertainty by encouraging individuals to **suppress their true selves to fit-in, leading to isolation and self-doubt**. This lack of genuine self-expression **prevents meaningful connections**, reinforcing the belief that their true selves are not acceptable.

Stereotype threat is the **fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's social group**, leading to increased stress and impaired performance. These issues **create a cycle of anxiety and underperformance, resulting in social withdrawal, increased conformity, and avoidance of risk**.

REFLECT

Write about a time you felt pressured to conform. What was that like for you?

Write about a time you experienced stereotype threat. What was that like for you?

Were there people or elements in these situations that eased your uncertainty and allowed you to be more (if not fully) authentically you? What helped?

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Fostering inclusive environments and creating psychological safety is crucial to mitigating the effects of things like conformity and stereotype threat. [Psychological safety](#) is a key characteristic of flourishing communities and successful organizations. It is the perception that one can:



SPEAK UP



TAKE RISKS



MAKE MISTAKES

WITHOUT FEAR OF NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES SUCH AS EMBARRASSMENT, REJECTION, OR PUNISHMENT

REFLECT.



When have you felt a sense of psychological safety and how did it impact you?

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety allows individuals to be authentic, fostering a healthy and productive community in which everyone feels a sense of belonging and is empowered to contribute. Here are a few tips for cultivating safety and belonging in your communities:



SET A WELCOMING TONE

Normalize newness and set expectations low. Explain and illustrate details rather than resorting to acronyms or shorthand. Foster a growth mindset for all. Encourage existing members of the community to reach out to and support new members.



INTRODUCE, INVITE, AND CONNECT

Use ice-breakers and structured activities to foster connection. Facilitate connection by giving others an opportunity to introduce themselves in ways that feel comfortable to them.



SEE THE WHOLE PERSON

Challenge your own and others' [biases](#) and stereotypes. Celebrate differences. Show humility and respect. [Learn names](#).



USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Ensure that activities and conversations are inclusive. Check in with others about their preferences and supportive accommodations.



DIVERSIFY SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Be mindful of those who seem left out. Challenge yourself to find new ways to connect with others you might not naturally be drawn to.



BE REAL AND HUMBLE

Be transparent with your own humanity and imperfections. [Avoid toxic positivity](#).

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Here are a few more tips for cultivating safety and belonging in your communities:



STAND UP FOR OTHERS

Avoid and address bullying. [Challenge offensive jokes or comments](#). Set and emphasize community expectations early and often.



CONSIDER ALL PERSONALITIES

Encourage [introvert-friendly activities](#) and consider ways to make all gatherings inclusive and accessible for all personality types.



CHALLENGE NORMS

Challenge perceptions and perceived norms, especially around drinking and partying. Don't assume everyone drinks or speak as if it's a foregone conclusion. Normalize alcohol-free activities.



ENCOURAGE OUTSIDE CONNECTIONS

Normalize building friendships across different communities. Allow and encourage social groups to be more [open and permeable](#).



CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

Use the guide on the next page or find a mentor to support you as you work to foster belonging in your community. Ask for help.



EDUCATE YOURSELF

Learn more about connection and belonging. As a starting point, see ["The Six "Ess"ential Conditions for Creating Connection"](#) and [101+ Ways to Create Connection and Community](#) (ProjectConnect).

REFLECT: PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Assess your strengths and growth areas using the following rating scale:

1 = Growth Area | **2 = Neutral** | **3 = Strength**
Then make a plan for improvement if needed.

CHECK LIST

RATING

PLAN

✓ Welcoming Tone

✓ Intro, Invite, Connect

✓ See the Whole Person

✓ Inclusive Language

✓ Diversify Connections

✓ Real + Humble

✓ Stand Up for Others

✓ Consider All Personalities

✓ Challenge Norms

✓ Outside Connections

✓ Check-In with Yourself

✓ Educate Yourself

OVERCOMING BELONGING UNCERTAINTY

FOLLOW YOUR VALUES

Let your [values](#) guide your everyday actions and interactions.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Many people experience [loneliness](#). Building friendships [takes time](#) and intentionality.

SEEK CONNECTIONS EVERYWHERE

Seek connections in [shared interests](#) and experiences. Look beyond your [immediate community](#).

FOSTER GROWTH MINDSET

Trust you can practice making connections and [develop more skill](#). [Ask for help](#).

TAKE INITIATIVE

[Start](#) something new. [Invite](#) people. [Introduce yourself](#). [Strike up conversations](#).

KEEP REALISTIC SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

Trying to [match perceptions of an ideal social life](#) is nearly impossible. Ebbs and flows are normal.

RECOGNIZE THE CHOICE OF FRIENDSHIP

Rejection is often about perceived fit, not personal flaws. Let go of toxic relationships.

INCREASE DISCOMFORT TOLERANCE

[Discomfort](#) is normal in social situations. Accept [awkwardness](#) and rejection as a normal part of the process. Manage [social anxiety](#). Be open to going to places and events by yourself.

PRACTICE SELF COMPASSION

Be kind to yourself. Everyone struggles and [comparing](#) your private struggles to others' facades is often misleading and can foster feelings of inadequacy.

OVERCOMING BELONGING UNCERTAINTY

EMBRACE DIFFERENCES

Celebrate them as a source of strength.

PRACTICE SELF-DISCLOSURE

It can be hard to be [vulnerable](#), but it's a necessary part of developing deeper friendships. Share your [struggles](#) and interests--yes, even the nerdy ones.

BE WARM AND AUTHENTIC

As best you can, try to be [friendly](#). When it's safe to, be [authentic](#). Use open [body language](#).

BE A GOOD LISTENER

[Listening well](#) to others is powerful. Be [present](#) and [attentive](#). [Validate](#) others. Show [empathy](#) and [curiosity](#).

KEEP AN OPEN MIND

Explore [new ways](#) be social together - try new interests, people, places, and activities.

EXPAND CONVERSATIONS

Go beyond the Notre Dame introduction and typical [small-talk](#) with [meaningful questions](#).

SPEND TIME WITH YOURSELF

[Normalize](#) and find ways to [enjoy being alone](#). Learn to appreciate your [own company](#).

ENHANCE YOUR FRIENDSHIP SKILLS

Friendships and connection take intentional thought and effort. Build your friend-making skills by strengthening your: [social](#) skills, [assertiveness](#) skills, ability to [apologize](#) when needed, ability to offer [forgiveness](#), ability to [repair relationships](#) when something goes wrong, and overall [communication](#) skills.

EXPECT OTHERS TO LIKE YOU

Assume people want you there if they invite you. Trust that you are "[liked until proven disliked](#)" and you're more likely to engage in a more likeable way.

REFLECT: BELONGING UNCERTAINTY

Take a moment to reflect on your experiences with **belonging uncertainty** below. Make a plan for ways you can foster a sense of belonging for yourself and for others.

What are strategies that have reduced your belonging uncertainty in the past? How might you use those strategies again in the future?

What is a new strategy that you want to try? What do you need to know or do to put it into practice?

Reflect on your current social life. Where do you experience the most belonging uncertainty? What strategies might work best in that situation?

How can you reduce belonging uncertainty for others around you? What is one strategy you can try out today?

What gets in the way of you using these strategies? What might you do to address those barriers?

CULTIVATING CONNECTION

Supporting Our Inherent Need to Connect

It's not always easy to make new friends or stay connected to old ones. We are wired for connection, though, and connectedness is a key aspect of well-being.

Disconnectedness can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation that are painful.

This guide includes education, reflection opportunities, activities, and resources for cultivating connection. It is designed to be a starting point for you to explore what works (or doesn't) for you as you intentionally build connection and friendships in your life.



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MEANINGFUL QUESTIONS

For Developing Connection

Pick out your favorite questions from the list below to have ready for the next time you have an opportunity to connect with someone.

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest? Why?
2. Would you like to be famous? What would you like to be famous for?
3. What would constitute a perfect day for you?
4. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
5. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained one quality or ability, what would it be?
6. If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future or anything else, what would you want to know?
7. Is there something that you've dreamt of doing for a long time? What is it?
8. What's a cherished memory you hold from your childhood?
9. How would you describe your family to someone who's never met them? How are they similar or different from other families you've met?
10. What is your favorite thing to spend money on? Has it always been that way?
11. If you could retire tomorrow, what would you do?
12. What is a book you've read recently or movie you've watched that inspired or moved you? What did you like about it?
13. What are five things that cheer you up?
14. What's one of the best compliments you've received?
15. What role do you play in your family? Is that the same role you played as a kid?
16. How do you think your family views your life? Is it similar or different to how you think they thought it would be?
17. How has your life been different than what you'd imagined?
18. Was there a teacher or teachers who had a particularly strong influence on your life? Tell me about them.
19. What did you think you were going to be when you grew up? What was it about that job that interested you then?
20. What traditions have been passed down in your family?
21. Create your own: _____

LISTENING WELL

For Developing Connection

Asking questions only gets us so far in building connections. The next step is to listen well. Feeling seen, heard, and valued are important to the foundation of friendships.

**Eliminate
Distractions**

**Listen to
Content**

**Make Eye
Contact**

**Listen to
Hear, Not
Respond**

**Paraphrase
and Reflect**

**Notice
Non-Verbal
Cues**

**Allow for
Silence**

**Support
and Affirm**

**Listen to
Tone and
Emotion**

**Nod, Smile,
or Encourage
Speaker**

**Listen
Without
Fixing**

**Ask Open
Ended
Questions**

SHARING WELL

For Developing Connection

Sharing parts of ourselves with others is an act of bravery and vulnerability. It is a necessary part of building friendships, however. Here are a few ways to be vulnerable.

5 Expressions of Vulnerability

“ Brene Brown defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." ”

New Ways of Interacting

Extend an invitation to meet for coffee, text a greeting without an excuse, or introduce your families.

New Topics of Conversation

Expand conversations by introducing new topics, new emotions, or life experiences. Follow up in later conversations.

Share Your Shine

Share accomplishments, joys, and proud moments. Ask about your friend's "shiny" moments and celebrate them.

Areas of Insecurity

Share areas of insecurity, moments of regret, or worries that are troubling you.

Ask for What You Need

Practice mindful awareness of your own needs and preferences, and find ways to ask for those things in your relationship

MAKING FRIENDS

Building Intentional Friendships

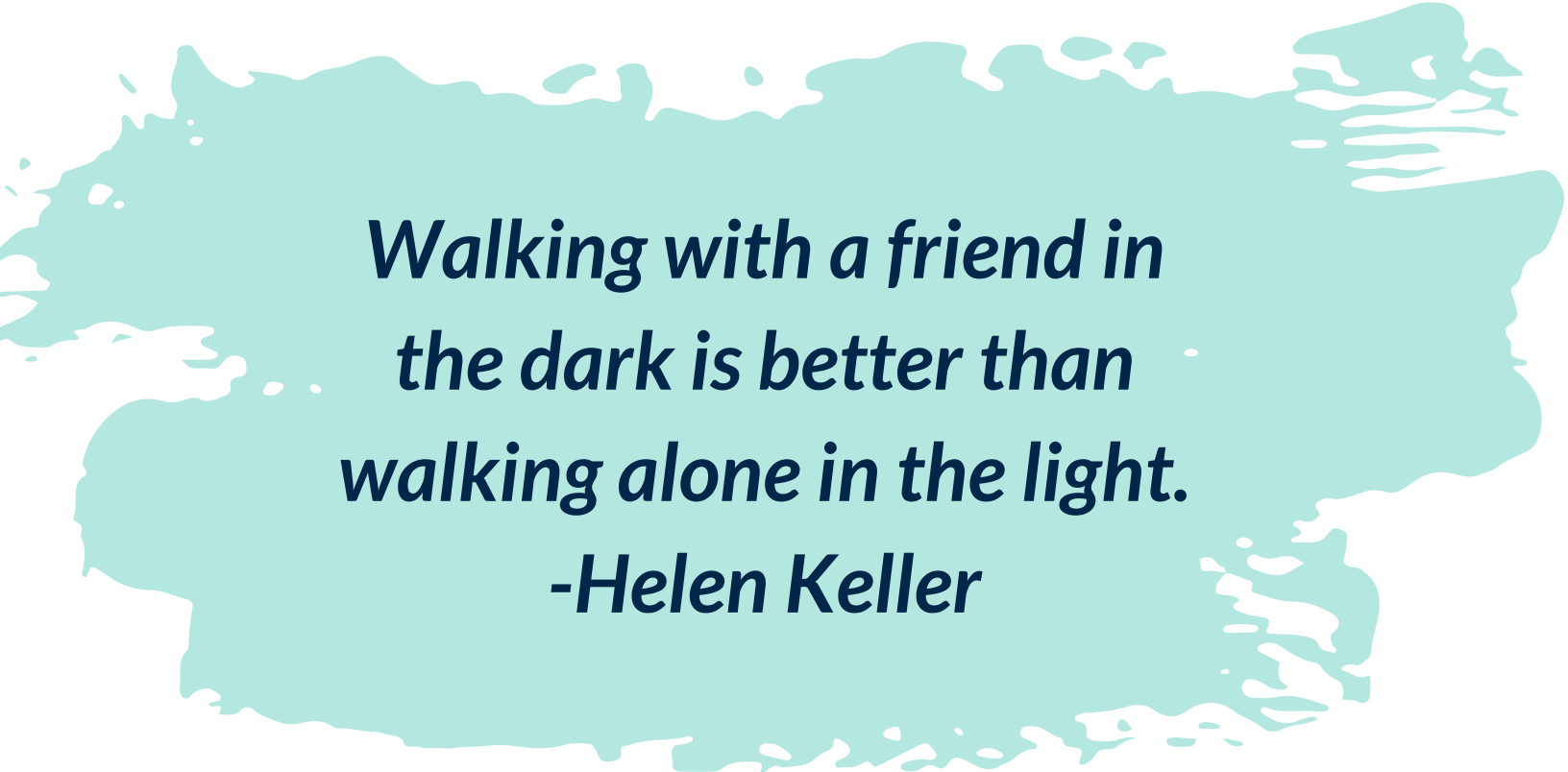
Many of us were never directly taught how to make friends. Advice we were given might have ended at “just be yourself” or “smile and be nice.” It turns out that making new friends and cultivating deeper friendships with existing friends requires thought, skill, and intentionality. While fairly simple, it’s certainly not always easy to make, develop, and keep friends.

This guide is designed to provide you with more context for the necessary elements of a strong friendship and opportunities to explore and reflect on your own friendships.



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***Walking with a friend in
the dark is better than
walking alone in the light.
-Helen Keller***

MAKING FRIENDS

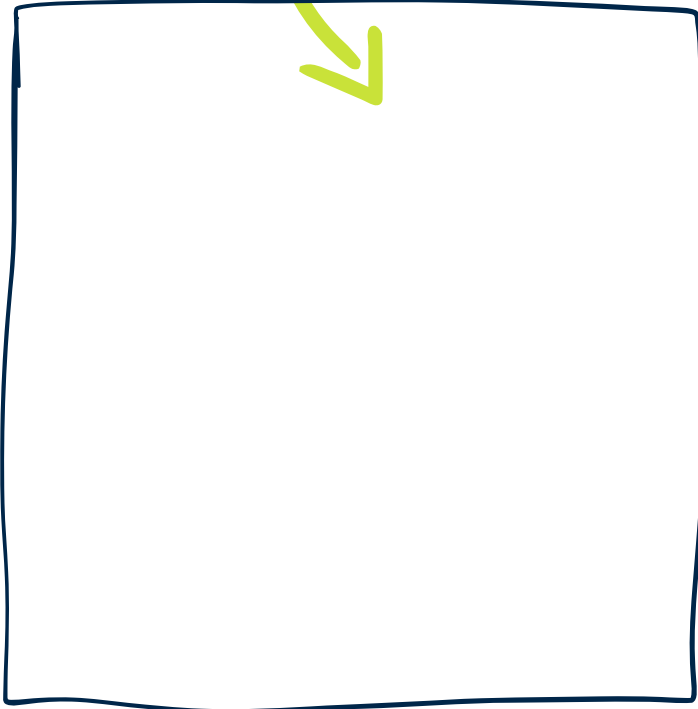
To develop deep and meaningful friendships, a combination of positive experiences, increasing mutual vulnerability, and spending regular time together are key.

Think about the friends in your life. Write their names in the pyramid where they fit. Acquaintances that you've had minimal contact with will be toward the bottom of the pyramid, and your closest friends will be in the peak of the pyramid.

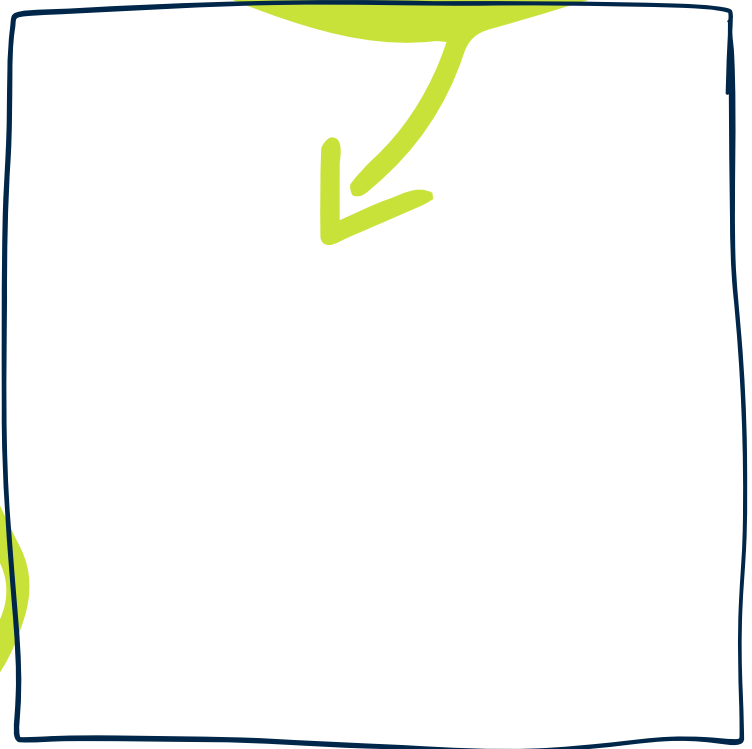


REFLECT: MAKING FRIENDS

Where do most of your friends fit in the pyramid?



Who is in a lower level of the pyramid that you'd like to invest in to move into a deeper friendship?



What is preventing you from moving some friends up the pyramid toward a deeper connection?



TYPES OF FRIENDSHIPS

There are different types of friendships in our lives, and people are linked to us in different ways.

Review the definitions of friendships below and write in your friends' names where they fit. What kinds of friends do you have more or less of?

Contact

Common

Confirmed

Community

Committed

CONTACT: Linked because we have something in common.

COMMON: Intentionally spend time together, but friendship is based on one commonality.

CONFIRMED: Shared history, but no a regular connection anymore.

We all tend to find that some circles of friends come to us more naturally, but we all need people in every circle.
-Shasta Nelson

COMMUNITY: Spend regular time together, deeper relationship.

COMMITTED: Intimately and consistently share lives with each other.

REFLECT: TYPES OF FRIENDSHIP

Which type of friendship circle (from the previous page) do you wish was fuller, stronger, or more meaningful?

What surprised you?

Which circle is the hardest for you to develop? Why?

Which circle do you want to celebrate?

Which circle expresses your greatest loneliness right now?

DEVELOPING FRIENDSHIPS

All friendships start on the left side no matter how much we're attracted to each other.

It's less about simply discovering the right friend, and more about developing the right friendship.

-Shasta Nelson



Put a star on the circle that represents your greatest loneliness right now. Now look to the circle(s) on the left of that one. Which circle(s) contains the best "pool" of friends to develop into deeper relationships?

How can you develop those friendships?

Name	Possible Activities	Deadline for Initiating

BEING HUMAN. AND KIND.

Cultivating Kindness for Self and Others

One of the best ways to foster connection with yourself and others is through kindness. Offering yourself and others intentional kindness is one of the greatest gifts you can share.

This guide is designed to provide you with a few activities and resources to infuse more kindness into your daily life.



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OFFER KINDNESS TO YOURSELF

Mindful Self Compassion

This 5 minute exercise can quiet the critical voice in your mind and offer you a sense of connection with others.

Response to Loved One

Remember a time when a loved one was suffering or struggling. What did you say to that person? What tone of voice did you use?

Response to Self

Think about a time when you were suffering or struggling. What did you say to yourself? What tone of voice did you use?

Gratitude Practice

Your critical voice is the negative narrative that likely was apparent in the last step. Take a moment to thank your critical voice. Your gratitude doesn't suggest the voice is right or acceptable - it just acknowledges that it exists.

Flip the Script

Take a moment to offer yourself the same kindness and compassion that you offered your loved one in the first step.

OFFER KINDNESS TO OTHERS

*Offering kindness to others makes them feel good, makes us feel good,
and strengthens our sense of connectedness.*

**List 5 "normal"
day-to-day activities:**

**List ways to add an
element of kindness:**

The worksheet consists of two columns of five green brushstroke boxes each. Five blue arrows point from the left column to the right column, indicating a flow of information or a relationship between the two columns.

LOVING KINDNESS MEDITATION

A loving kindness meditation can increase our [individual well-being](#) and enhance our social connections, as well as support our mental and physical health.

Explore the Calm App for more [friendship supporting meditations](#).

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you be peaceful.

May you be safe.

1. Sit comfortably, close your eyes if it feels right to you.
2. Focus on these loving kindness messages.
3. Imagine receiving these messages from those who love you.
4. Imagine sending these messages to people you love.
5. Imagine sending these messages to people who are neutral.
6. Imagine sending these messages to all living beings.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Shasta Nelson

- [Friendimacy: the three requirements of all healthy friendships](#)
- [Relationally Fit: The Social Secret to a Longer, Happier Life](#)
- [Friendimacy Workbook](#)
- [Making Friendships Happen Workbook](#)

Additional Resources

- [In 'Together,' Former Surgeon General Writes About Importance of Human Connection](#)
- [How Loneliness Hurts Us and What to Do About It](#)
- [Eight Ways to Ease the Pain of Loneliness](#)
- [Loving Kindness Meditation](#)
- [How to Find Your Self-Care Squad](#)
- [The Key Ingredient That Might Be Missing from Your Well-Being](#)
- [randomactsofkindness.org](#)
- [Calm.com - Friendship Meditations](#)
- [101 + Ways to Create Connection and Community \(ProjectConnect\)](#)
- [6 Essential Conditions for Creating Connection](#)