

How to Make Time with Family and Loved Ones Count

We get it, we're all busy. But real, meaningful relationships thrive when they're face-to-face. Here's how to make time for them.

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In a time not so long ago or far away, eating family dinner, connecting with your spouse after tucking the children into bed or talking with your children in the in-between times like the ride to school was well, just routine.

But times have changed. Our growing cultural mind-set is that we're too busy to connect with those closest to us, even though we collectively want to. Parents and children alike increasingly invest their downtime in phones and on social media and there's a general sense that there's always *more*. More to read, more to reply to and more to see. Because of this pressure to always consume more, it can feel wasteful to slow down to appreciate the people in front of us, for fear of missing out on life happening elsewhere.

Although it's true that we can always consume more information, it's not true that slowing down and taking time to connect — particularly face-to-face — is a waste of time. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Making time for social connections can reduce the chances of depression and anxiety caused by loneliness. And those connections can have broader benefits as well. John Gottman notes in his book, “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work,” that enhancing your “love maps,” as in your knowledge of your spouse's day-to-day experiences, is key to a happy, healthy marriage and a happier, healthier life.

But just because the data shows that making time for face-to-face interaction has a huge payoff doesn't mean it's easy to do.

As someone who coaches people on improving their time management, I understand that the gap feels far between what you know you should do and what you feel you have time to do. To help bridge that divide, here are a few simple ways to integrate face-to-face interaction into your family's lifestyle.

Eat together

Eating together as a family requires intentional effort, but most families can manage it at least a few times through the week. The intention, however, starts at the top.

In my family growing up, eating dinner together was a priority, so how we chose activities, such as which dance classes to take, involved whether or not the class schedule would allow us to eat as a family. In your family, you may want to reassess the timing of extracurricular activities to see if you can align your schedules to allow everyone to have a seat at the table. You also may want to see if you can make any adjustments to your work schedule (such as going in earlier and leaving earlier some days) so you can make it home in time to eat with your spouse or children.

If family dinners at home won't work regularly, then try to find alternatives. For example, try to eat breakfast together or have weekend rituals such as savoring a Saturday brunch or a Sunday dinner together.

To get the full benefit of those meals, keep away the phones and turn off the TV. You may want to have a basket for everyone to put their phones in, on silent, before the meal starts. The goal is to not just eat but to get a sense of what's going on in everyone's lives, and to get the gist of their emotional state. For example, if you notice your usually talkative daughter seems sullen, you now have the opportunity to follow up later and ask her, "You didn't seem like yourself at dinner. Are you doing O.K.? Did something happen at school?"

Wind down together

Another important opportunity to reconnect with each other is winding down together before bed. You probably know that using electronic devices in the hour before bed makes it harder to fall and stay asleep. So you can improve your physical health and the health of your relationships by using that time to connect with your spouse instead. Some of my coaching clients form a pact with their significant other to be off technology by a certain time of night. If you need some extra reinforcement, apps like OFFTIME can help to block your phone during certain hours. Plus, it's a good idea to set your phone to "do not disturb" mode so you rest peacefully.

This tech-free before sleep ritual gives you the opportunity to pay attention to your spouse and to stay emotionally attuned to how he or she is feeling. It's also a perfect time to ask for details about their day or their thoughts, or follow up on earlier side comments like "I had a rough day at work" when your attention isn't divided by children, evening errands or other issues around the house.

Live life together

I understand time can feel tight and we all legitimately have things to do. So the best opportunity for face-to-face, meaningful connection is to invite your family members into whatever you're already doing. Ask your kids to help you cook. Invite your spouse to walk the dog with you, and turn it into an evening ritual. Or suggest they join you on that evening errand to Target.

Connection develops and strengthens in the little day-to-day moments. In her book "Daring Greatly," Brené Brown says, "We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and

powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection. Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow.”

Making those deeply personal, face-to-face connections a priority in your family builds meaningful bonds. It also acts as a powerful prevention strategy so you can reduce the time and energy you need to spend on cures.