

Vergie Charlery's Self Care e-book #4

Social Support



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Social Support

Humans are fundamentally a social species. The quality of our social interactions can impact our careers, personal relationships, family dynamics, and life satisfaction. Constructive social interactions make us feel that our thoughts, ideas, and opinions matter. Meaningful relationships make us feel content, secure and loved. Moreover, as we get older, engaging in supportive social interactions can keep us physically and mentally healthy and prevent cognitive decline (Kensinger & Gutchess, 2017; Ristau, 2011).

Unfortunately, it isn't always easy to surround ourselves with supportive people. According to experts, about 20% of the people in our society feel lonely (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Moreover, we can't expect to get along with everyone all the time either. In any social environment, it is only natural for misunderstandings, disagreements, broken hearts, or hurt feelings to emerge occasionally. Yet, when the relationships that matter to us start to crumble or toxic individuals enter our social circles, we might begin to feel lonely or rejected. We might also feel this way when we realize that our positive feelings towards another person aren't reciprocated, such as when we treat them with respect and help



them when they need a hand, but they barely acknowledge our presence or take us for granted. Lastly, we may also weaken our relationships unintentionally when our lives get busy, and we can't make time for our friends or relatives.

Social self-care involves understanding our social needs and improving our interpersonal skills so that we can be better at establishing expectations for our interactions, setting boundaries, communicating effectively, and treating others with kindness and gratitude.



Gratitude

Gratitude is the state of thankfulness and appreciation. When we feel grateful, we acknowledge that life, and other people, contain goodness. Gratefulness allows us to appreciate the things we have and the opportunities we are given. We may also think of gratitude as understanding life's generosity to us.

So, why should we practice gratitude for our social self-care? Besides increasing our overall happiness, gratitude provides numerous benefits for our social well-being. For instance, gratitude can make us more forgiving and more likely to help others. Moreover, gratitude can positively influence how we start and manage our relationships. According to experts, gratitude may bring us closer to our romantic partners, increase our satisfaction with our partners, and boost the success of our intimate bonds (Lambert et al., 2010; Gordon et al., 2012). Similarly, gratitude allows us to appreciate our friends and makes our friendships more pleasant (Lambert et al., 2010).



Some of us have a natural tendency to be grateful, but even if gratefulness doesn't come easy, we can still cultivate it with practice. Here are a few suggestions.

● Write a gratitude letter.

Take a moment to think about the people in your life and what you are grateful for. Write a letter to someone you care to express your appreciation to and give or send your letter as soon as you can. Your letter doesn't have to be lengthy or explain the details of why you feel grateful. A short, heartfelt note would suffice.

● Gratitude affirmations.

Sometimes we may need a reminder of what we are grateful for. Affirmations that focus on appreciating what we have can make us more grateful. Here are some examples you can use.

- I am grateful for my health.
- I am grateful for my family.
- I appreciate my partner/friend/coworker/family member.
- I am grateful to have my partner/friend/coworker/family member in my life.
- I appreciate all the help and support I receive from my partner/friend/coworker/family member.
- Thanks to my partner/friend/coworker/family member, my life is better.

● Keep a gratitude journal.

Some people write their gratitude daily in their journals. Others incorporate them into their weekly or monthly plans so that they can be reminded of what they appreciate every time they look at their plans. You might want to write a few things you are grateful for at an interval you are comfortable with.

● Say "thank you."

Sometimes we skip phrases like "thank you" or "please" when we interact with others, especially if we are close to them. Saying these phrases more often can show others that you appreciate them and their contribution to your life. As a result, they may treat you with greater appreciation as well.

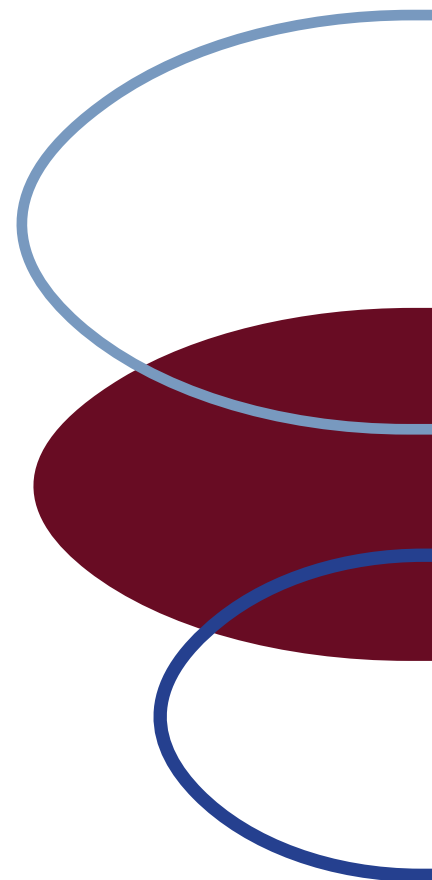




Exercise: Finding Gratitude

Can you think of a relationship that you'd like to improve? For instance, it could be a friendship with someone you care about but have started to feel estranged from over time. Or maybe, you wish you were on better terms with your in-laws or your cousin. In this exercise on the next two pages, you will get to take the first step towards mending and strengthening that bond.

- 1. Start by thinking about the relationship you want to improve.** Instead of thinking about the negatives that weakened this relationship, try to focus on the connection between you and the other person and why this person is important to you.
- 2. Next, think about why you are grateful that this person is in your life.** Take as much time as you need to remember specific ways this person contributed to your life. Did they extend a hand to you when you needed help? Did they provide a shoulder to lean on? Did they make you laugh? Did they make you feel beautiful or intelligent? Did they share their delicious meals with you? Did they give you good advice?

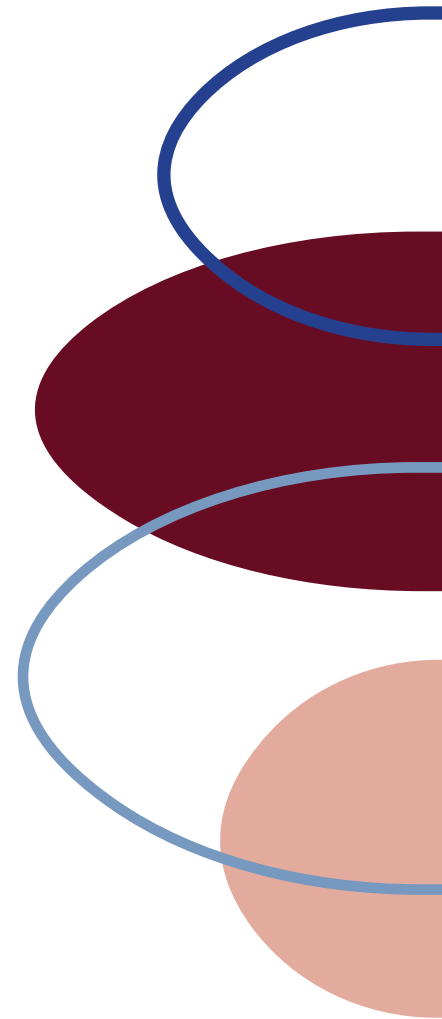




- 3. Now, write everything you came up with that makes you feel grateful for this person.** At this step, you may already be thinking differently about this relationship than when you started the exercise. Hold on to this feeling and the gratitude you found.
- 4. Keep your list handy and read it before your next interaction.** If you don't have any plans to interact with this person, I hope this exercise has encouraged you to reach out to them.

Take home:

Sometimes, we forget the positives in our relationships and let our bonds erode. This exercise was designed to help you remember those ignored or long-forgotten positives to help you find gratitude in your relationships.



Kindness

Treating others with kindness means that we are gentle, friendly, considerate, and generous to others (Johnstone, 2010). When we are genuinely kind, our kindness comes across as honest and compassionate. It helps people feel at ease when they interact with us, builds trust, and strengthens relationships. More importantly, practicing kindness has a positive influence on our general happiness (Rowland & Curry, 2019)

Imagine someone you know who is kind to you. Chances are, you have mostly positive feelings for this person, and you may feel relaxed when they are around. But you might also be more likely to help this kind and friendly person than another acquaintance who has been rude in the past. This is the other power of kindness; our kindness often

spreads to those we treat kindly. Hence, this is the idea behind engaging in random acts of kindness, which are the unplanned, spur-of-the-moment offerings of kindness to someone. You treat a stranger with kindness, and they are kind to someone else, and so on.

Some people are naturally kind to everyone all the time. On the other hand, others find it harder to be kind now and then, especially if they are in a foul mood or must interact with someone they don't get along well with. The good news is that kindness is something we can all improve. One of the most popular ways we can become more kind is by practicing loving-kindness meditation, which increases the warmth and compassion we feel for ourselves and others.





Exercise: Loving-Kindness Meditation

Also known as Metta meditation, loving-kindness meditation nurtures generosity, tranquillity, and compassion and may help cultivate unconditional positive emotions toward yourself and others (Zeng et al., 2015). You can try the following Metta meditation below:

1. Start by finding a comfortable sitting position

in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Allow your eyes to close gently. Spend the next few moments allowing your mind to settle and focus on your natural breath. When your mind starts wandering, simply bring your attention back to your breath.

2. Slowly increase your awareness of the present moment

and connect with your deepest intentions for happiness, safety, and ease. Cultivate your intention by incorporating some phrases of Metta directed towards yourself.

- May I be happy
- May I be safe
- May I be healthy

Repeat your phrase(s) slowly until you feel connected to the intention behind them.



3. Now bring your attention to someone close to you,

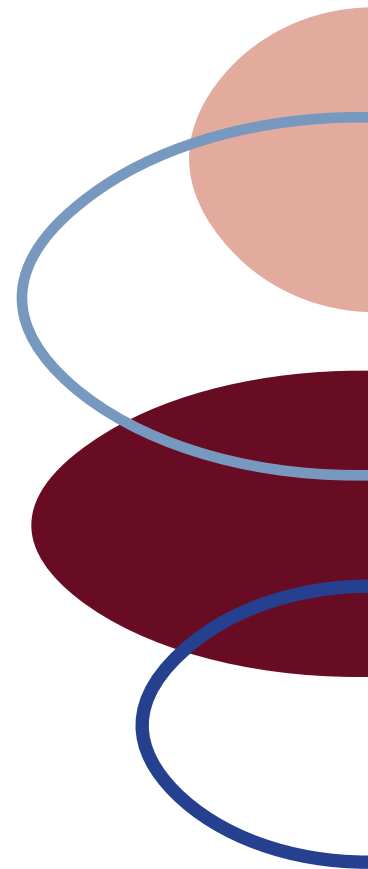
such as a good friend, a family member, or even your beloved pet. Engage your natural desire to see this person (or pet) happy and thriving. Voice your intentions with phrases directed at them.

- May you be happy
- May you be safe
- May you be healthy

4. This time, think about someone neutral,

such as a casual acquaintance, a coworker, or your child's teacher. Again, direct your positive intentions toward this person.

- May you be happy
- May you be safe
- May you be healthy





5 Finally, bring your attention to someone you don't like.

This could be someone you quarrelled with, a politician you dislike, or a driver who displayed angry hand gestures toward you.

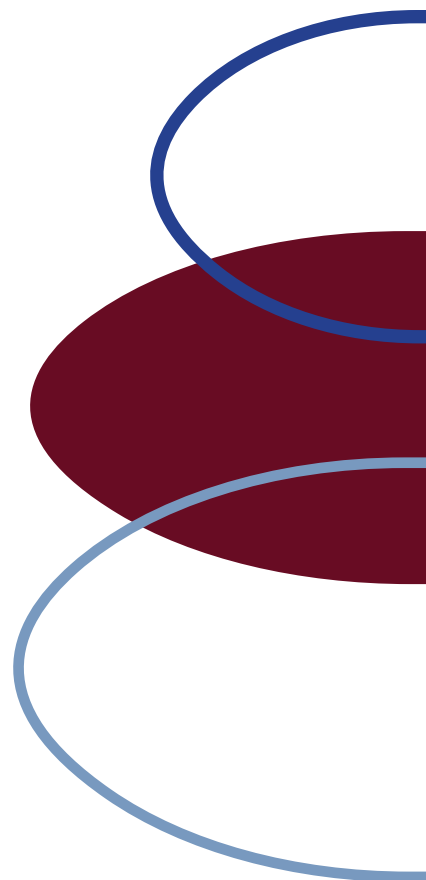
- May you be happy
- May you be safe
- May you be healthy

6. Finish your practice

by slowly increasing your attention toward the sounds around you and allowing your eyes to open.

Note:

Loving-kindness meditation becomes easier after a few times. If you prefer, you can gradually increase your focus from yourself to others. For instance, in your first meditation, you can stop after step 2. In your next practice, you can add steps 3 and so forth. That way, you'd have a basis to build upon by the time you add step 5.



Effective Communication

Do you wish you knew how to communicate better? Sometimes, we say something to others, but they hear something else. Other times, we misread others and misinterpret what we are told. These misunderstandings lead to unwarranted reactions, stressful conflicts, and rough emotions. Then, you run into problems in your personal and professional relationships in the blink of an eye.

Communicating effectively is more than concisely exchanging information. It means you can convey

your message but also understand the meaning, intentions, and emotions of what others tell you. In short, effective communication is about being understood while making others feel heard. Even if we are effective communicators most of the time, we can all benefit from improving our communication skills to boost our emotional and social well-being. There are three essentials for effective communication: active listening, clear self-expression, and assertive communication. Let's discuss these effective communication essentials.



Being An Active Listener

There is a difference between hearing words and active listening. When you actively listen to someone, you pay attention to their words, body language, and intonations. As a result, you fully understand their message and intentions. You also get to strengthen your bond with them by making them feel heard, and acknowledging their opinions, even if you disagree with them. How can we become active listeners? Here are some suggestions.

- **Focus on the conversation.** Don't multitask while listening.
- **Pay attention to body language,** intonations, and other nonverbal cues. Chances are a shaky voice that says "I'm fine" probably isn't fine.
- **Avoid the urge to interrupt.** Let the speaker finish talking.
- **Don't judge an argument before it is finished,** whether your judgment is positive or negative. Listen to the entire message and process it first.
- **Don't redirect the conversation to you** or start giving unsolicited advice.
- **Ask questions if you don't understand** what the speaker is trying to say, or if you want to know more. This will also show that you are invested in the conversation.



Expressing Yourself Clearly

Do people understand what you tell them right away, or do most people misunderstand you? If it is the latter, you might have problems expressing yourself clearly. When we communicate clearly, we make sure others can understand what we are trying to convey. Here are a few suggestions to express yourself clearly.



- **Choose the correct words.** If you don't know the exact meaning of a word you utter, you might end up saying something completely different than what you intended.
- **Be direct.** If you need someone to help you move your books, tell them, "I need your help to move my books," instead of "Maybe you could give me a hand some time to possibly move my books."
- **Slow down.** Take pauses if necessary. Give your listener time to process your words.
- **Be concise.** Some of us give too many unnecessary details, which only confuses the listener.
- **Don't meander.** Don't include side stories or off-topic comments. Otherwise, the conversation may progress in a different direction.
- **Avoid sounding redundant.** Say it once unless the reader needs to hear it again.
- **Body language matters.** If your body language and other nonverbal cues don't match your verbal message, you may confuse your listener or undermine your intention.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication is essential to communicate effectively. When you are assertive, you express your thoughts, needs, and emotions in an open, honest, and respectful way without being demanding or argumentative. Suppose your significant other started to leave their dirty socks all over the place. You might be frustrated by this situation. If you confront them and tell them, “You’re such a slob. Your disgusting socks are everywhere. Do I have to do everything in this house?” You don’t accomplish much besides insulting them. However, if you say, “I understand you’re tired when you get home, but if you don’t put your socks into the hamper, it adds to my already long list of chores,” you are assertive and effective in your communication. Here are a few tips to be more assertive when you express yourself.

- **Don’t downplay how you feel.** If something is bothersome or hurtful to you, don’t try to sugarcoat it. Don’t insist that you don’t mind something if you can’t stand it.
- **State the facts.** Don’t include labels and judgments.
- **Don’t exaggerate.** If your sister added an extra cup of flour to the cake batter, telling her that she “ruined everything” will only ruin the fun you and your sister could have baking together.



Building a Support Network

A lot of people feel lonely even though they know many people. Knowing someone superficially is not the same thing as being able to share your worries and dreams with them or lean on their shoulder during difficult times. For those, you need a supportive group of people you feel close to. In other words, you need a support network to share your good and bad experiences to feel valued and always supported. Moreover, you may feel encouraged to chase your dreams and start feeling more confident with the help of your close connections. Some of us are blessed with amazing friends and family supporting us in everything we do. However, some of us don't

have solid support networks, or the people we interact with aren't very supportive. There might be several reasons we don't have a support network, such as if we have moved to a new area and haven't met many people yet or when we or others are going through major life changes. Furthermore, we might have also had problems with establishing bonds due to long-term illnesses, social isolation, or because we had some traumatic experiences. Hence, how you will need to build, strengthen, or expand your support network will depend on your specific circumstances. Let's discuss how you can build new connections or strengthen existing ones.



Building New Connections

Building new relationships can be difficult, especially after a significant life event, such as divorce or relocation. Here are a few suggestions.

- **Join a club.** Joining a club or an interest specific organization may help you meet people who share your interests. For instance, if you enjoy running, you might want to join a running club.
- **Volunteer.** Like joining a club, volunteering may also allow you to meet like-minded people. Moreover, volunteering may also help you contribute positively to your community. Many organizations welcome and appreciate volunteer efforts. However, before volunteering, you might want to research the organizations in your area and consider those with missions that represent or align with your values and vision.
- **Join a support group.** Major life changes, such as the death of a spouse, can be daunting. Joining a support group can help you bond with people who have similar experiences.
- **Go to events that interest you.** For instance, if you are a bookworm, you can meet other voracious readers by attending poetry and book readings.



Strengthening Existing Connections

Sometimes we never had the time or opportunity to get to know some of our connections on a deeper level. In some cases, we might have felt too shy to approach them. However, if we hide under a rock and avoid putting any effort into our existing relationships, we'll never let anyone become close to us.

The first step toward strengthening existing connections is to identify suitable candidates. For that, you need to listen to your intuition. Once you know whom you'd like to get to know better, you might want to set aside time for them. Many of us don't make enough time for our friends due to hectic work schedules, family duties, or other responsibilities. Nevertheless, if we can't have time for others, we can't expect them to make

time for us either. Similarly, if you reach out to someone and they can't seem to make time for you, you might move on to the next person on your list.

Another key to building strong relationships is having the social skills we discussed earlier in this module. For instance, if you know how to communicate effectively and treat others with kindness, you're more likely to nurture your relationships. Nonetheless, strengthening social bonds can be a long process, and you can't control what other people want or need. Don't lose hope if some of these relationships don't work out or you feel your feelings are not reciprocated. The only way to let the right people in is by keeping your heart and mind open.



Setting Boundaries

Suppose Jonathan's friend, Lisa, likes calling people whenever she has something new to tell them. At first, Jonathan didn't mind answering an occasional call and never set boundaries. However, Lisa started to call Jonathan more frequently over the past few months. Now, she calls Jonathan every time she has something to tell, even if it's unimportant. As a result, Jonathan's phone rings multiple times a day, including when he's at work, while eating his dinner, enjoying quality time with his family, or even after he goes to bed.

Boundaries are unwritten rules of interaction. Even though personal boundaries are invisible, setting and communicating them is essential to protect your well-being, ensure your safety, and give you peace of mind. How we set our boundaries may depend on our culture, personality, life experiences, self-esteem, and communication style. Although we may have healthy boundaries with many people in our lives, some of our relationships may lack effective boundaries and may make us feel like doormats. Hence, we need to know how to set boundaries and enforce them.

An essential step toward setting boundaries is to understand that your needs are as important as other people's needs. If you treat other people's needs as priorities and downplay the value of your needs, other people will follow suit and act as if their needs are above yours. As a result, they may

expect you to cater to their needs all the time. For instance, in Jonathan's case, his friend expects Jonathan to be always available to chat and behaves like her needs are more important than Jonathan's job performance or need to sleep. And the more Jonathan doesn't make his needs clear and keeps answering the phone, the more Lisa believes that her friend is always there to chat.

Setting boundaries also involves assertive communication. Sometimes, we may feel like we are being mean and feel guilty when we are assertive or say no. However, we can't make our boundaries clear if we always agree to do everything we are asked to do. Improving your assertiveness would surely help you to phrase your objections carefully. Yet, try not to overexplain or apologize for saying no.

Finally, while setting boundaries is crucial, we also need to respect the boundaries of others. We can't expect them to respect our relationship rules if we disrespect theirs. After all, respect and boundaries typically go both ways.





Exercise: Setting Healthy Boundaries

Are you struggling to set healthy boundaries in one of your relationships? Take a moment to think about the specifics of this relationship and how you can establish and enforce your boundaries with this person by answering the following questions.

1. **With whom do you need to set or improve boundaries?**
2. **What is the extent of your relationship?**
3. **How long have you known each other?**
4. **What are the behaviours that bother you?**
5. **What specific actions can you take to set or improve your boundaries?**
 - a. **What are your needs that these actions will address?**
 - b. **What do you expect from the other person?**
 - c. **What are the consequences if they continue to disrespect your boundaries?**
6. **How do you think this person will react to your effort to set boundaries?**

Note:

Take as much time as you need to answer the questions above. Once you are satisfied with the actions you need to take (step 5), you can start setting your boundaries. If you determine that your efforts will cause them to react negatively, such as if they are likely to become vindictive or treat you in a passive-aggressive manner, you might be dealing with a toxic relationship, which we will discuss next.

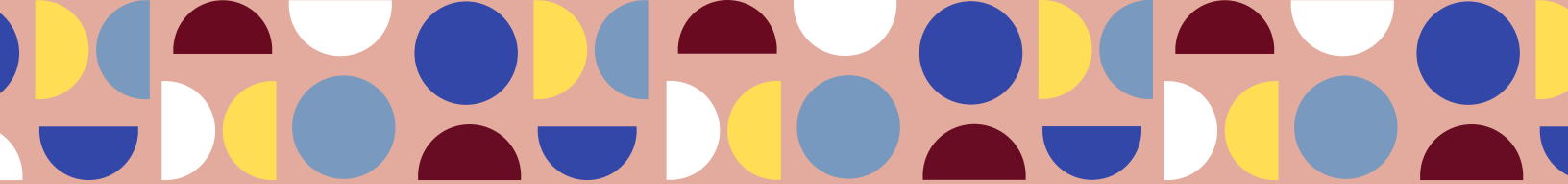
Ending Toxic Relationships



Sometimes, no matter what we do, how much gratitude and kindness we develop, and how assertive we are in our communications, we may be plagued by toxic relationships. Toxic people in our lives may be those who disrespect our boundaries despite our efforts to establish them. They might also be those who make us feel unloved or unworthy. If unchecked, these relationships may pull us into unnecessary drama, start conflicts, and interfere with our lives. Therefore, ending toxic relationships is essential for our social self-care.

No relationship is perfect, and it is only natural to have conflicts and drama occasionally. So how can we tell if a relationship is toxic? As a rule of thumb, minor differences in opinion or taste don't mean that your relationship is toxic. Also, in close relationships, people may have different ways of expressing their love and appreciation, and you can typically settle your differences through effective communication. Still, there are common red flags you can watch for in your relationships, especially if your gut feelings insist there is something more under the surface.

Here are some red flags.



- They often put you down.
- They make you feel bad about everything.
- You feel like you are walking on eggshells.
- They downplay your opinions.
- They minimize your talents, education, and abilities.
- They often joke at your expense.
- They make you feel unloved or unworthy.
- They are inconsistent in how they treat you.
- They demand all your time and attention.
- They manipulate you into something that doesn't align with your values.
- They gossip about everyone, including those closest to you.
- They have aggressive tendencies.
- They don't respect your boundaries.
- They ignore you when you say no.
- They show up uninvited.
- They are nowhere to be found when you need help.
- They are generally disrespectful.
- They are unwilling to return favours.
- They make you feel uncomfortable.
- They don't like other people in your life.
- They seek revenge when they believe someone has wronged them.
- They are envious of other people's happiness or success.

If you realize that someone you know shows some of these signs, it might be time to let them go. Also, note that there might be other red flags in addition to those listed above. Therefore, the surest way to know if you should distance yourself from someone is by assessing how they make you feel. If you feel cautious or walk on eggshells when they are around, you might consider your relationship again.

Sometimes, toxic relationships are hard to end, especially if they involve family members or people with whom we must interact regularly, such as a neighbour or coworker. If that's the case, we may still weaken our bonds and limit our interactions as much as possible.



In Sum

Every human on this planet must interact with others regularly. Therefore, our well-being needs to function well socially. Yet not every interaction we have is pleasant, and our negative social experiences and feelings of loneliness or abandonment can impact us physically and mentally. Social self-care involves understanding and taking care of our social needs. We can fine-tune our interpersonal skills with proper social self-care, become more apt in our daily interactions, and treat others with kindness and gratitude. We can also establish more realistic expectations from others, set or reinforce boundaries, and communicate effectively. As a result, we may be happier in our social circles.