

Making Connections: Eight Ways to Connect.

-Dr. Andrew Weil

Feeling whole and connected to the Earth and others takes effort, but it is rewarding work. By bringing your focus outside of yourself, you will learn to reach out to people and to the world around you in positive ways. Giving of yourself, from spending time with friends and those in need to taking care of the environment or a companion animal, also promotes positive interaction. Here are eight steps to help you get connected:

1. Nature and Earth. If you think of nature as a hostile force that is separate from yourself, you will go through life unnecessarily afraid and cut off from one of the great sources of spiritual nourishment. Whether you connect with nature on wilderness trips or lunch breaks in a city park, you can always slow down and observe the infinite variety of her ways. One way to connect with nature is through plants: gardening, collecting plants from the wild, growing cactuses and flowering bulbs, and having unusual and useful plants in and around the home can all help promote connectedness with nature. Plants can enrich your daily life, bring comfort and joy, and remind you that however you think of yourself, you are also part of the natural world.

2. Animals. Research shows that people who have pets have less illness than people who do not. Pet owners also recover faster from serious illness and tend to be happier. Ex-prisoners who form relationships with pets have lower recidivism rates than those who do not. While pets can and inevitably will bring owners great joy, they are a responsibility: they demand a certain level of attention and care. However, the rewards that pets give in return are often too great to be measured. Loving and caring for a pet is a great way to learn how to love and care for other humans and nature.

3. Family. We are not meant to be alone - we are meant to be parts of bigger families, bands, and tribes. Human beings want and need the intimate support of a real family. Unfortunately, the nuclear family of our modern society is contracted. It is hard not to look at the "extended families" of some cultures with wistful longing, if not outright envy. Where I live, in southern Arizona, the Hispanic population seems way ahead of the rest of us in providing for the needs of family. In many Hispanic families the old people, even when infirm, continue to be valued members and live at home. Don't settle for nuclear family contraction. Extend!

4. Community. Community is the sense of living and working together for common goals. We are naturally communal beings and derive great satisfaction from the experience of belonging to a group with a common purpose. The strength and comfort of community come from the principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Our society often fails to provide for this need, and unless we work to create community, it does not happen, or does so in unhealthy ways. You can define community any way you want. It may be your neighborhood, your sports team, your environmental action group, your church, your social club. What makes it work is what you bring to it and the role you let it play in your life. This kind of connectedness gives us the power to improve our lives and make the world a better place.

5. Serving. Selfless service means giving of yourself to help others with no thought of return. Many religious traditions extol the ideal of selfless service as one of the great aids to dismantling the ego cage and restructuring personality. Each day provides countless opportunities to practice putting others' interests ahead of your own, such as giving of your time, energy and presence to reduce the suffering or increase the happiness of others. The goal is not to acquire spiritual merit, increase your chances of going to heaven, or earn the admiration of the community. Instead, service is a way of acknowledging that we are all one and that the happiness of each is connected to the happiness of all. The more you can experience the interconnectedness of all beings, the healthier you will be.

6. Loving. To love is to experience connection in its highest, purest form. Humans tend to confuse loving with other feelings that take us back into the world of separateness and fragmentation. Popular songs today seem to be mostly about the joys and pains of romantic love, not about loving as connection, which is something

altogether different. Learning to love takes practice and time, especially in a culture that is focused so intensely on romantic love. In intimate relationships that work, the in-love state is replaced by mutual loving. That can happen only if both partners are mature and committed to a life together. Many people today have no idea what to do when they fall out of love with their partners; they think it means there is no possibility of continuing the relationship, which is why divorce rates are now so high. Realizing that you have within you a limitless source of love that can benefit everyone and everything will help you form the best and strongest connections of your life.

7. Touching. Human beings need to touch and be touched. A great deal of animal and human research shows that individuals deprived of physical contact are insecure, poorly adjusted, and more prone to illness. Some cross-cultural research suggests that sexually repressed and touch-deprived societies are much more given to violence. Our own society, unfortunately, is in that category. Touching is an easy connection to make because it feels so good. Please do more of it.

8. Higher powers. One reason the 12-step programs work as treatments for addiction is that they encourage connection to a power greater than yourself. It does not matter much how you conceive of that higher power; what matters is the sense of connection to it. It can be the father-god of the Old Testament, Jesus Christ, the Compassionate Buddha, the Great Spirit, the Goddess, pure, undifferentiated Consciousness, or simply the Mystery. You are free to choose the way you conceive of the universe and your place in it. People who experience themselves as part of and supported by something larger than themselves are less fearful and more healthy than people who view the world through the bars of an ego cage, seeing the world as separate from themselves, and as being disconnected.