

Social Skills

Why are social skills important to your recovery?

Social skills help you connect to others. Living the life of addiction is often equivalent to living in isolation. The deeper you slide into addiction, the less you see and communicate with others. You may lose touch with yourself. Shame and guilt can drive you away from normal day-to-day relationships.

Social skills include communication and etiquette—what you say and what you do in relation to others. Are you able to share pleasantries and make small talk? These are valuable skills for making people immediately comfortable. Are you at ease in gatherings where you don't know anyone? The ability to connect quickly with strangers can transform situations that could trigger relapse into fun, rewarding experiences. Do you go out of your way to meet the needs of others? Helping others feel comfortable and welcome goes a long way toward enriching and solidifying friendships. Caring about the needs of others also conveys respect for them, a sure way to connect in a meaningful way.

Even passing associations with people can yield meaning for you. For example, when you enter a new Twelve Step meeting, you are surrounded by unfamiliar people. Yet if you listen closely to others, you will find some answers to your problems. You may also find comfort in learning that others have lived through similar experiences. Developing social skills can reduce or eliminate certain triggers for relapse.

What's your communication style?

Recovering people sometimes struggle with being either too passive or too aggressive. These tendencies can have long-lasting effects on your life and your sobriety. For this reason, assertiveness training is often recommended for people in recovery.

Passive behavior can cause you to

- deny yourself or your rights
- avoid expressing feelings
- remain hurt and anxious
- give up your right to choose
- fail to reach your goals

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Aggressive behavior may cause you to

- reach your goals and also create resentment in others
- express your feelings in a hurtful way
- minimize others and put them down
- deny others their rights

Assertive behavior allows you to

- express feelings honestly
- attain your goals
- respect others
- improve your self-image

Once you understand your communication style, you can make some changes to work out trouble spots. For example, if you don't listen well, practice silence. Make sure you don't interrupt others. Are you too loud or too soft-spoken? Moderate your volume. Do you put your needs first? Or last? Practice ways to ensure that everyone's needs are recognized and respected.

How can you improve your social skills?

First, remember that most people aren't born with great social skills. Most of us have to develop those skills by watching others and modeling what we see. You can do the same thing. Pick out a person you resonate with from your circle of family, friends, or Twelve Step group members. Analyze what that person does that makes you feel welcomed. Why do you trust that person?

Chances are you'll find that the person you chose to observe has some specific social skills that you can model. Does he or she reach out a hand to greet you? Smile? Remember your name immediately and ask about what you discussed the last time you met?

The basic skills of putting others at ease are really quite simple.

- Make eye contact—but remember that eye contact is a culturally specific behavior. Native Americans and Asian Americans, for example, might use eye contact differently than European Americans do. For example, Native Americans may sit in an AA meeting and look at the floor instead of the person talking. This is their culturally accepted behavior.
- Care enough to remember names and personal details, and ask about them.

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- Offer your hand to shake.
- Imagine what that person might need and ask to provide it, whether it's a place to sit or a beverage.

These basic kindnesses show respect and care for someone—it may be someone you just met or someone you see every day. Acquaintances, friends, co-workers, and family members all deserve the same respect and care.

Another aspect of recovery involves learning when to say no. Refusal skills are a must, because you need to feel comfortable doing it. What are some ways to say “no thanks” without offending others? The trick is to respect both your own needs and your host's. If you are offered an alcoholic drink at a party, a simple “No thanks, I prefer soda,” will do. What are some other likely situations you should prepare for? Plan for those situations and think about how you'll respond. You can always role-play refusal skills with a friend or another AA member.