

MAKING CONNECTIONS: DEVELOPING NEW RELATIONSHIPS AND FRIENDSHIPS

Ken Browner, Psy.D.
Psychologist
Lakeland Community College

It is very common for college students to report that they lack a sense of community and an adequate support system. Often students are in a state of transition that affects their social relationships. For instance, they may find that many of their friends are attending college out of the area. They may be coming back to school after losing a job and being cut off from their previous work relationships. Others may have never felt that making connections with others was their strong suit in the first place, or felt that they had never quite found their social niche.

In addition to wanting stronger friendships, some students may find that their dating or romantic relationships are not working out and that they have a hard time meeting someone they are compatible with.

There are many reasons that students may have difficulties developing relationships and friendships. If this is an issue for you, counseling may offer an opportunity to explore the particular obstacles that seem to be getting in the way for you. Often there is a need to work on developing social skills or communication skills.

However, there is another key idea that many people do not take into account. I call this the principle of proximal connection versus the principle of purposeful connection. Often, we meet the people who become our friends or even our significant others or spouses because they happen to be in close proximity. The people you have access to are the ones who are nearby (proximal). Maybe they happen to live in your apartment building, or they happen to work at the same place you do. There is nothing wrong with developing relationships with the people who you find are around you. These are what I call "proximal connections," and they can be wonderful, satisfying relationships.

However, if you find that it is hard to connect in this way or that these relationships are not as satisfying as you would like, you may need to try a different approach. The alternative approach is to seek out what I call purposeful connection. This is not a revolutionary idea, and it is probably something you are doing already to some degree. The idea is that you may need to go out of your way and place yourself in different situations and environments, in a purposeful manner. You can do this by actively pursuing your interests, values, and the things that you are passionate about.

By becoming engaged in activities and organizations related to those interests and values, you will be exposed to people who share your interests and values. It may be that the relationships you develop as a result are more satisfying than your proximal relationships. A simple example is that someone who has strong religious interests and faith may get involved in church, synagogue, or mosque activities and meet like-minded people with similar values. The resulting relationships may be particularly satisfying. It may take some work to identify what kinds of activities and organizations are out there that may be worth exploring. Also, if you are not sure what you are passionate about or interested in, then it may be worth taking some time to figure it out. This approach can benefit you in multiple ways. Beyond meeting people who you are likely to connect with, you will be engaged in activities that are likely to bring you a greater sense of meaning, purpose and well-being.

The following questions will help guide you toward the process of seeking out purposeful connections.

1. How have you gone about the process of seeking out connections and relationships up to this point? To what extent have you relied on “proximal connection,” and to what extent have you created the opportunities for “purposeful connection?”

2. What are some of your interests, values and passions? The possibilities are endless, but they may fall into some of the following categories:

a. Artistic / musical / writing / culinary (for example, crafts, visiting museums, listening to or playing music, watching movies or anime, cooking, writing or reading novels or poetry, etc.)

b. Altruistic (for example, helping people or animals in need in all kinds of ways, raising funds or working for specific causes such as finding a cure for a specific disease or kind of illness)

c. Political (for example, party politics, advancing the rights of a particular group, working toward racial justice, advocacy for a specific cause)

d. Religious (for example, attending religious services, studying sacred texts, pondering issues of faith and meaning)

e. Hobby-related (from model trains to cars to electronics, video games and beyond)

f. Nature (for example, hiking, learning about nature, camping, etc.)

g. Intellectual (for example, interests in philosophy, science, history, or a variety of other fields of knowledge)

h. Physical activity (playing or watching sports, exercise of all sorts)

4. Once you do find purposeful activities to pursue, are there barriers or skills that you need to develop that will allow you to make the purposeful connections in those settings? These could be practical skills like tennis lessons, or developing social, communication or anxiety management skills.

