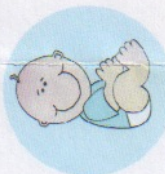


NETWORKING 101

for Moms

by Christa Melnyk Hines



Whether you are a new mom, new to your community or simply feeling isolated, you may wonder how to connect with other moms like you. Creating and maintaining a thriving, balanced social network is an empowering and healthy way to care for yourself, and by extension, your family.

Why support matters.

Isolation can contribute to feelings of depression and can negatively impact the entire family. In a research study commissioned on behalf of MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International by the Barna Group in 2010, researchers found that mothers believe they are more optimistic and resilient to life's daily stresses and occasional crises when surrounded by a community of support. Even short bursts of time spent with friends can boost a woman's oxytocin levels, a natural hormone that decreases stress and anxiety.

JOIN A MOTHERS' GROUP.

Moms' groups come in a variety of sizes, philosophies and commitment levels. Shop around to find a group that fits your personality, lifestyle and parenting approach. Get a feel for the landscape by visiting the group as a guest.

Schedule activities. Losing yourself in the daily rotation of feedings, naps, baths and playtime may be fine for awhile. However, injecting your calendar with activities throughout the week for both you and your child will energize you, give you something to look forward to and help you feel connected to the world outside your home. Not sure where to begin? Check with your local library and bookstore for story hours and seek out "Mommy and Me" groups, which run the gamut from physical activities to musical education. If you work full-time, talk to other working moms about meeting up at the park or an indoor play area for a Saturday morning play date.

CLICK INTO SOCIAL MEDIA.

Still in your pjs at 3:30 in the afternoon after walking the floor all night with your colicky baby or a sick child? During the toughest times of parenthood, we can find comfort knowing others can relate and we aren't alone.

Christine, a mom of three, says Facebook helps her feel more supported. "Especially when other

moms share their 'real' moments about being a mom. I think, 'Hey, I'm not so crazy after all—I've done that, too!'"

Thanks to social media like Facebook, Pinterest, MeetUp.com and mommy blogs, you can complement your offline groups with online friends and click into the land of the living anytime. No shower required!

GET ACTIVE.

Schedule time for an exercise class when your spouse is home or join a gym that offers quality childcare. Not only are fitness classes a fun way to get in shape, you'll feel mentally refreshed, more patient, and more optimistic in general. And the more you go, the more you'll get to know the other participants, which will help make you more accountable to meet your fitness goals.

If a gym isn't in the budget, find a friend or two to walk with a few times a week, either around a park, the neighborhood or a mall on inclement-weather days. As your child grows older and less patient sitting in a stroller, promise time during or at the end of the walk for him to play at a park or indoor play area.

PURSUE YOUR INTERESTS.

Tempted to push personal interests aside due to overwhelming family demands? Constantly

putting yourself last can lead to unhealthy feelings of resentment. Negotiate time with your spouse to pursue your hobbies and other passions. Invite friends to join you, whether for a gardening or cooking class, a book club or another fun activity.

CREATE A CALENDAR.

Take your schedule as seriously as you do your family's. Make appointments with yourself, including fitness classes, walks with friends, moms' meetings, a solo trip to that boutique down the street, and so on. Sure, sometimes a sick child will throw a last-minute wrench in your plans, but isn't flexibility one of the first lessons moms learn? When necessary, communicate your appointments with your spouse so he isn't caught unaware.

SEEK BALANCE.

Stretching yourself in too many directions is just as harmful as functioning in isolation. Strive to balance your needs with your family's needs.

"I recognize that I can only fulfill so much in one day, and maybe I have fulfilled my purpose for that day by spending time with a friend instead," says Angie, a mom of two. "I think recognizing what the stressors are is the first step, then rationalizing if they are worth the anxiety and energy."

Pull away from people who don't energize you and decline opportunities that don't inspire you.

While social support and a healthy lifestyle contribute to overall happiness and well-being, depression is a serious illness requiring medical intervention. Seek help immediately if you have suicidal thoughts or if you experience chronic symptoms of depression. For a complete list of symptoms, check out the National Institute of Mental Health's website, <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>.