

Why should we Nurture our Social Connections?

Did you know that people who are more socially connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier, and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected?

Communicating with others is fundamentally good for us, which is perhaps why human beings are social animals and wired to seek social support and understanding. But what is happening inside us that makes social connection so vitally important to our physical and mental health?

WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Before we delve into the benefits of social connection, it's important to explore and understand the opposite feeling: loneliness.

It's important to understand that loneliness is subjective. In other words, someone could have a big family and lots of friends and still feel lonely. On the flip side, an individual can be alone and feel no sense of loneliness whatsoever.

In 2018 a group of Australian psychologists published a paper, The Loneliness Report, loneliness was described as an "absence of desired closeness, sincerity and emotionality in their relationships".

Essentially, the emotion isn't based on how many people we have around us, but the quality of the interactions we have with them.

WHAT HAPPENS TO US WHEN WE'RE LONELY?

According to the Loneliness Report, when humans experience a lack of quality connections, the impacts are both mental and physical.

Mental:

1. Increased likelihood of depression and social interaction anxiety.
2. Depression and social interaction anxiety cause people to become more lonely.

Physical:

1. Poorer sleep,
2. more headache symptoms,
3. increased stomach complaints and
4. more frequent respiratory infections.

Other research conducted by Cleveland Clinic psychologist Amy Sullivan, PsyD, has shown that loneliness increases the production of cortisol in the body. This can impair cognitive performance, compromise the immune system, and increase your risk for vascular problems, inflammation and heart disease. A Swiss national survey even found a connection with loneliness and high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes.

THE BENEFITS OF STRONG SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Adults seem less likely to struggle with mental health symptoms if they are socially connected. One study published in the Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry found that adults who were already socially connected were less likely to develop mental health distress after one year.

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The same study also indicated that adults with mental health distress were less socially connected prior to experiencing distress.

Having good social connections can also help during a crisis. This was reported in a study in Austria in early 2020, which was published in the British Journal of Health Psychology. A group of individuals were interviewed over a period of six weeks while in lockdown. It was found that people who had greater social connectedness were less likely to experience COVID-19-related worry. On the other hand, the interviewees with small social circles reported higher distress and more fatigue.

Later in life, research has even suggested that having close ties to friends and family, and participating in meaningful social activities, may help maintain mental acuity and slow down cognitive decline.

HOW TO IMPROVE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

It's easy to say 'get more friends', but in practice this can be hard for some people. However improving your social connections doesn't necessarily involve searching for new acquaintances. You can invest time in nurturing existing relationships with people who you value by spending more time with them, and by ensuring you speak with one of them every day.

According to 'Better Health Australia' there are three kinds of connections that you can have with people:

1. Intimate connections – with people who love and care for you, such as family and friends.
2. Relational connections – with people who you see regularly and share an interest with, such as workmates, teammates, or those who serve your morning coffee.
3. Collective connections – with people who share a group membership or an affiliation with you, such as people who vote like you do, or people who have the same faith.

Ask yourself: do you have meaningful, long-term relationships in any of these 3 areas?

You might find you are spending too much time with people who don't know you that well rather than with people who share similar values.

Indeed, one key way to strengthen social connections is to reach out to the people you already care about, including co-workers, family, or neighbours. Contact them and let them know you would like to be in touch more often. Arrange to catch up for a coffee, to go to a music gig, or to play a round of golf.

If you want to meet new people, there are several ways to do this:

1. Joining a club.
2. Starting a conversation with someone you see regularly, like someone at the coffee shop.
3. Making more of an effort to get to know your work colleagues.
4. Taking a break from social media can make you become much more intentional in seeking out real relationships.

While some strategies may not work for everyone, it's important to keep trying and find a strategy that works for you.

Although seeking new or improved connections may mean pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, the rewards far outweigh the negatives. Ultimately, staying socially connected can help to bring meaning to our lives. Although this can be challenging in a complex world, research proves that seeing more people and enjoying quality interactions, can boost both our physical and mental health.

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