
Strong relationships, strong health

Summary

- Having friends and other social connections is good for your health and wellbeing.
 - Being lonely or isolated can affect your mental and physical health.
 - Older people who remain connected with others and have strong relationships are likely to have a better quality of life
-

Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing.

The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links include lower rates of anxiety and depression, higher self-esteem, greater empathy, and more trusting and cooperative relationships. Strong, healthy relationships can also help to strengthen your immune system, help you recover from disease, and may even lengthen your life.

The good news is that while many of these benefits can make you happier and more contented, there's also a flow-on effect, whereby people around you will want to spend time with you. In this way, social connectedness generates a positive feedback loop of social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

In contrast, loneliness can have dramatic consequences for your health. Loneliness can lead to disrupted sleep patterns, elevated blood pressure, and increased cortisol (a stress hormone). It can affect your immune system and decrease your overall sense of contentment. Loneliness is also a risk factor for antisocial behaviour, depression and suicide.

Older people are particularly vulnerable. If your mobility decreases, it can be harder to get together with other people. However, older people who remain connected with others and have strong relationships are likely to:

- have a better quality of life
- be more satisfied with their life
- have a lower risk of dementia and mental decline
- need less domestic support.

Younger people (teenagers and people in their 20s) are also at risk when they are isolated. A lack of social relationships can have a direct impact on a young person's physical wellbeing by increasing the risk of obesity, inflammation and high blood pressure.

These three health issues can lead to long-term health problems, including heart disease, stroke and cancer, but a varied social network can help protect against physical decline.

What's more, the benefits of social ties are significant, even if your other mortality risk factors (such as socioeconomic status, smoking, drinking, obesity and lack of physical activity) are low. In other words, even if you live a healthy life, you still need to be socially active to stay well and happy.

It's important to recognise that loneliness is different from solitude. Feeling lonely is a problem, but being alone may not be a problem at all. Many people live alone and have happy, fulfilling lives.

How to improve your social connections

Feeling lonely is hard to cope with. Luckily, there are things you can do to tackle loneliness. For instance, you can nurture healthy relationships with people who make you feel good by spending time with them, and by trying to talk to someone every day.

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 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 all these three areas?

Perhaps you tend to stick with old friends and don't feel able to meet new people. Or maybe you avoid people from your past, preferring to mix with people who don't know much about you. Be honest with yourself about your social habits.

Think about the sorts of relationships you have with people, and the sorts of relationships you would like to have. You might find you want to make new friendships, or perhaps you want to try to make your existing relationships stronger.

One way to strengthen your social connections is to reach out to the people you already know, such as co-workers, family, school friends or neighbours. Give someone a call, or write or email them and let them know you would like to be in touch more often. Arrange to have a coffee or a meal, or to listen to music, have a round of golf or play chess. Think about the interests you share. Facebook and other social media are also great ways to stay in touch.

There are lots of **ways to meet new people**. Start a conversation with some of the people you see every day, such as the people on your bus each morning, people at the gym or the park, or the regular checkout operators at your supermarket. (Just remember to make sure that you are safe when meeting new people. Having other people around – for example, meeting in a public place – can be a good strategy.)

Other ideas include joining a sports team or a walking or hobby group, or volunteering. Call your local council to find out about local groups or programs, or visit your local community centre or library – there's always something happening in your community.

Not all strategies will work for everyone, so try some different approaches to see what works for you. If the first thing you try doesn't work out, try something different. beyondblue's **Connections matter** booklet has some useful ideas for older people.

The idea of social connection is to share your time, experiences and stories with people, and to also listen to them. Gradually, you will build a group of people in your life who care about you, and who you also care about. Both your mind and body will reap the rewards.

Relationships help society too

Social ties affect not only your personal health, but also extend to broader society. People who spend more time with each other forge happy, productive communities.

Where to get help

- Better Health Channel, for information on: **making friends**, tips for **making friends** and **staying involved as an older person**
- **beyondblue**, for information on staying active as an older person
- **Relationships Australia** provides counselling, mediation, dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education, community support, employee assistance programs and professional training. Services and programs are available nationally. Phone: 1300 364 277
- **Neighbour Day** is Australia's celebration of community that encourages people to connect with those who live in their neighbourhood.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Relationships Australia Victoria

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2018 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.