

January 2020 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Social Ties/Friendships Affect Our Health

Our social and personal links to others can have powerful effects on our health. Whether with family, friends, romantic partners, neighbors, or pets, social connections can influence our biology and well-being. One sign of a healthy relationship is feeling good about oneself around partner, family member, or friend. You feel safe talking about how you feel. You listen to each other. You feel valued and you trust each other. Friends increase our sense of belonging and purpose, reduce levels of stress, improve self-confidence and self-worth, and help us cope with traumas, such as divorce, serious illness, or death of a loved one.

Sheldon Cohen (scientist) at Carnegie Mellon University has explored links between relationships and health for more than three decades. As reported in *News in Health* at the National Institutes of Health, Cohen's team exposed more than 200 healthy volunteers to the common cold virus and observed them for a week in a controlled setting. They found "that the more diverse people's social networks—the more types of connections they had—the less likely they were to develop a cold after exposure to the virus." They also found evidence that people with more types of connections also tend to have better health behaviors (such as not smoking or drinking heavily) and more positive emotions.

Cohen's research group has also been exploring whether simply believing one has strong social support may help protect against the negative effects of stress. Long-term conflicts with others are a potent stressor that affect health. They found that its effects are buffered by perceived social support. "People who have high levels of conflict and low levels of social support are much more likely to get sick when exposed to a virus. Those with high conflict and high levels of social support seem protected." In addition, hugging seemed to shield against stress. People who reported having more frequent hugs were less likely to develop an infection after viral exposure. In other words, having a variety of social relationships might improve one's ability to fight off germs, may help reduce stress and heart-related risks and promote a more positive outlook on life. In contrast, loneliness and social isolation are linked to poorer health, depression, and increased risk of early death.

Adults with strong social support have a reduced risk of significant health problems, including depression, high blood pressure and an unhealthy body mass index (BMI). Studies have found that older adults with a rich social life are likely to live longer than their peers who have fewer connections. Good friends help a person celebrate good times, provide support during bad times, prevent loneliness and give a person a chance to offer needed companionship. Friends can increase a sense of belonging and improve self-confidence and self-worth.

Developing and maintaining good friendships takes effort. Various sources suggest the following as ways to meet new people: attend community events (often listed in newspaper or community bulletin boards); volunteer at such places as a museum, library, place of worship, hospital, charitable organization or community center; extend or accept invitations to social gatherings; take up new interests such as enrolling in our local Academy for Lifelong Learning classes (strike up conversations with those who attend); join in faith community activities; or take a walk and engage in conversations with people met on the walk. The number of friends is not as important as the quality of the friendship.

Nurture friendships by displaying kindness and gratitude (forget criticism and negativity). Listen and ask what is happening in friends' lives. Pay attention to what is being expressed. Be willing to disclose personal experiences and concerns about oneself. Demonstrate that one can be trusted and responsible and reliable. Follow through on commitments and keep private information confidential. Be available to get together for lunch, dinner, or a cup of tea! And lastly, resist the temptation to stay home and not attend social settings!

The following list is from *The Friendship Book, 2005* by Francis Gay. This is a partial list of resolutions for January. I will give up complaining and be more grateful. I will give up pessimism and be an optimist. I will stop judging harshly and think kind thoughts. I will give up bitterness and turn to forgiveness. I will give up anger and practice being patient. I will give up being gloomy and enjoy the beauty around us.

Sources: <https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/04/building-social-bonds>
<https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2017/02/do-social-ties-affect-our-health>
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/friendships/art-20044860>