

Social Connections: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

In this holiday season, don't forget about one of the greatest gifts we receive from others: friendship. Whether it comes from our spouses, classmates or next-door neighbors, healthy relationships are the gifts that keep on giving. Our friends are there in good times and bad. They give us something to laugh about, a pick-me-up after a bad day at work and someone on the other end of the phone who listens when we need to talk. They relieve stress, increase our happiness, and even help us manage our grief.

They even help us extend our lives — and studies suggest that cultivating good friendships has the same impact on our longevity as quitting smoking.

In the article below, Dr. Andrea Klemes, chief medical officer of MDVIP, explains how our social circles help us live longer and, as just as important, healthier.

How Social Connections Help Us Live Younger Longer

By Andrea Klemes, DO, FACE

Living longer and healthier isn't always about exercise and healthy eating. While these things are important and account for a huge part of our health span - the period of our lives we live without chronic conditions and mobility issues -- there are other factors that play a big role too, including our relationships.

Decades worth of studies show the impact social circles have on our health. In fact, a 1979 study found the risk of death doubled for those with the fewest social ties when compared to people with the most social ties.

We've learned a lot since that groundbreaking study was published. For example, good, healthy relationships can:

Lower our stress. Studies have linked stress to negative biological changes in our DNA that can affect our mental health. But positive relationships seem to dampen this effect. They also help us moderate inflammation, which can increase our risk for heart disease, the leading cause of death.

Boost the release of feel-good, healing hormones. Studies show that good relationships can increase the production of chemicals like oxytocin, reducing blood pressure and cortisol levels while promoting growth and healing.

Help us make healthier choices. The kinds of friends we have can reinforce healthy behaviors. For example, friends who exercise tend to encourage their friends to workout. The same holds

true with healthy eating. Social circles can also check in on us when we're not our best, helping us stay on course with healthier decisions.

The inverse is also true – when we eat with friends who overeat, we tend to eat more, too. The number of friends we have also influences our behavior. The more friends we have, the better our mental and physical health; it can also positively influence how often we engage in bad behaviors like smoking.

Reduce pain. Scientists think that relationships help endorphins bind to opioid receptors in the brain reducing our pain. Indeed, studies show that our social network size correlates with pain relief. There is also good research that the most intimate relationships between partners and spouses can also ameliorate our pain.

Improve our sense of purpose and self-worth. The link between our social circles and our self-esteem is both real and reciprocal. It can affect us throughout our entire life and create a positive feedback loop lifting everyone in the circle.

Boost our happiness. People with more friends are typically happier than people with fewer — and studies have quantified this discrepancy. Those who had five or more friends they could share their concerns with were 60 percent happier than those with fewer than five friends. And happiness is a big factor in how long we live.

Help us cope with trauma. Studies have shown that social circles help mitigate effects of really bad experiences such as stillbirth, head trauma, childhood experiences and the death of spouses or other loved ones.

The biology of friendships

Some of this is obvious – if we make healthier choices because our friends do, then we benefit from having friends who make healthier choices. But there's also something going on from a biological standpoint.

As mentioned, our social circle helps release chemicals like oxytocin that make us feel better and lessen the pain we feel. But scientists think our relationships also help regulate our physiological systems from our immune response to our “fight or flight” response.

These short-term responses which are so effective at protecting us can also contribute to long-term health issues like inflammation. Our relationships may help attenuate these responses once their need has lessened.

In short, people with a strong social circle tend to have better functioning physiological systems. This shows up in measures of blood pressure, inflammation, waist circumference and even body mass index.

Tips to improve our social circles

Of course, we need to cultivate our relationships for them to be beneficial. And some relationships, regardless of well they're nurtured, are bad for us from a health standpoint. Studies point to the damage bad relationships can do to us, from failed romantic relationships to abusive relationships we have in childhood and adulthood.

But isolation — especially as we age — isn't good for us either. That's why our relationships need to be replenished and expanded even as we get older. What can you do when your social circles began to wane?

- **Volunteer** – you'll meet new people while you're doing something that studies show help us live healthier longer.
- **Join a group** focused on your favorite hobby. Doing things that you like with people who share your interest can lead to better friendships.
- **Take a class** in a subject that's new or even a master class something you're good at. Again, you'll meet people who share your interest, and you'll be learning together, which helps you mentally.
- **Start exercising with a group.** Yoga or aerobic classes are great ways to meet people. So are cycling and walking groups. Plus, you'll get extra longevity benefits from exercise.

You already know how good it feels to break bread with a friend, hug them or talk with them over the phone. Now you know all the good things being friends with them does for your health. So, keep nurturing those positive relationships. They really are one of the keys to a healthy life span.