



Healthy Connections

Studies have shown that individuals who feel a sense of connection to others and their communities are likely to live longer and enjoy happier, healthier lives than those who do not. Despite being more connected than ever through technology, the quality of real, meaningful interactions is dwindling. Many of us are living farther apart from family and friends, and spending more time in front of screens—even when surrounded by others, we often find ourselves in our own worlds. Here are simple steps to enhance a sense of connection, even for those with the busiest schedules. Small, sustainable changes can significantly impact both physical and emotional well-being.

Understanding Connection

What is Connection?

Connection refers to one or more persons being open and available to one another, engaging by being themselves, being open, and most importantly, being present. Connection goes beyond online interactions; it involves engaging in meaningful ways in person.

What Connection is Not

Connection is not merely being in the same room or having superficial interactions. It requires genuine engagement, trust, and presence. The challenge of connection often lies in overcoming feelings of not being accepted or belonging, as well as addressing deep-rooted issues from the past that may hinder one's ability to connect.

The Heart of Community

Community is a sense of fellowship and belonging with like-minded individuals. It moves beyond individualism (me) to collective care (we). Communities are not bound by physical places but by the feeling of belonging. Individuals can belong to multiple communities such as sororities, fraternities, churches, sports teams, jobs, and book clubs. These communities can be organized based on various factors like religion and culture, with the ultimate goal of meeting the needs of all members.

Why We Are Disconnected

Several factors contribute to our disconnection from others:

- **Background:** Growing up in a big city can feel less connected compared to a small town where everyone knows each other.
- **Anxiety:** High stress from juggling work, family, and other responsibilities can lead to feelings of disconnection.
- **Self-focus:** While self-care is important, an excessive focus on oneself can deter others from wanting to connect.
- **Social Media:** Keeps us informed but reduces face-to-face interactions with loved ones.
- **Technology:** Advancements like smart TVs and smartphones, though convenient, often distract us from spending quality time with others.



The Impact of Social Connections on Health

Research indicates that the quality of social connections is directly related to cardiovascular health. Even perceived loneliness is associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke. For individuals with existing heart disease, poor social integration predicts a 61% increased risk of death. These statistics underscore the importance of fostering strong social connections for overall health and well-being.

Making Time

For those with busy schedules, here are some practical ways to stay connected:

- **Use Technology Positively:** Utilize email, social media, and text messaging to check in with loved ones, but prioritize in-person interactions whenever possible.
- **Plan Ahead:** Schedule time to connect with loved ones weeks in advance and set reminders to ensure follow-through.
- **Be Considerate of Schedules:** Compromise to accommodate everyone's busy lives.
- **Do Things Together:** Engage in activities together to strengthen bonds.
- **Ask About Others:** Genuinely inquire about how loved ones are doing and listen attentively to their responses.

Cultivating Community

Engaging in community requires collective effort and mindfulness:

- **Shop Local:** Support local businesses to enhance the local economy and familiarize yourself with the community.
- **Volunteer:** Give back to the community, benefiting both those who give and receive.
- **Respond, Don't React:** Approach interactions with thoughtfulness and calmness, avoiding reactive negativity.
- **Mindfulness:** Consider others and contribute positively to the community.

Connection Challenge

Consider these questions:

- When is the last time you saw a family member who lives outside of your home?
- Do most of your family and friends live in the same state as you?
- Do you use social media to stay “in the know” of what’s happening with family and friends as opposed to a meet up or phone call?
- Are you on your phone or computer when in the presence of others?
- When speaking with friends and family, does the statement, “we haven’t seen each other in a while” come up?
- Are you excited about connecting with others?

What you do about your responses is up to you, but consider this: finding ways to build connection and community can significantly boost your mental and physical health. Reflecting on these questions can be a starting point to identify areas where you might improve your interactions with others. By taking small steps towards more meaningful connections, you can enhance your overall well-being and foster a supportive environment around you.

Try saying “hello” to one new person each week for the next 30 days. Maybe it’s a coworker you haven’t spoken to yet, a parent at your child’s school you haven’t met, or maybe a neighbor you recognize at a local coffee shop. It’s a small step that could lead to meaningful connections and a greater sense of community.

Building connections and fostering community can greatly improve our well-being and quality of life. Engaging with others and forming meaningful relationships provide emotional support, enhance mental health, and create a sense of belonging. Additionally, community involvement encourages collaboration, mutual aid, and shared resources, which collectively contribute to personal growth and resilience. By prioritizing these connections, you can experience a richer, more fulfilling life.