



ALIVE!

IN CONTACT WITH OTHERS

WE ARE A SOCIETY that admires independence. The methodology of our educational system is established on this premise. Parenting is conducted in such a way as to develop independence in our children. We even construct our theology around ‘me, myself, & I.’ There is some validity to our approach, however, evidence is mounting that we profoundly need each other.

Social relationships, friendship, and community depict a life of interconnectedness, mutuality, “in-tune-ment” with others. As beautiful as the concept is theoretically, we all know the challenge and the work involved in developing, maintaining, and living in touch with one another in our society. The effort, time, commitment, and giving of one’s self to social relationships, however, has the potential of radically impacting your risk of disease and premature death. Research is crying out that this dimension of our lives has a larger impact than we may have realized.

Three decades ago researchers sought to establish that, “Social relationships, or the relative lack thereof, constitute a major risk factor for health—rivaling the effect of well established health risk factors such as cigarette smoking, blood pressure, blood lipids, obesity and physical activity.”¹ Unfortunately, few have taken this conclusion

very seriously. If anything, current evidence indicates that the quantity and quality of social relationships are decreasing in society in general. “For instance, trends reveal reduced intergenerational living, greater social mobility, delayed marriage, dual-career families, increased single-residence households. . . . Despite increases in technology and globalization that would presumably foster social connections, people are becoming increasingly more socially isolated.”²

Social relationship is a fuzzy term and, when it comes to research, an even fuzzier variable that lacks precision and is difficult to quantify. After all, there are relationships that truly support and there are relationships that are destructive and emotionally exhausting. A meta-analysis on this topic was conducted. A meta-analysis is a systematic review of multiple studies from which conclusions are made that have greater statistical power than when drawn from a single study. Data from 148 different studies was investigated to determine the extent to which social relationships influence risk for mortality. In all, there were 308,849 participants, with 51% from North America, 37% from Europe, 11% from Asia, and 1% from Australia. Across all studies, the average age of participants at initial evaluation was 63.9 years, with even representation of male and female participants. While the points established will not sound like rocket science to us, perhaps the extent to which they impact our ability to stay alive will.

- Social relationships act as a buffer, hindering/limiting injurious risk factors from harming you.

- Negative social relationships are linked to greater risk of death. For example, while being married is thought to be a measure of positive social integration, miserably married is not.
- “Social relationships are linked to better health practices and to psychological processes, such as stress and depression, that influence health outcomes in their own right; however, the influence of social relationships on health cannot be completely explained by these processes, as social relationships exert an independent effect.”³
- Social support is linked to better immune function and to a reduction in immune-mediated inflammatory processes.
- Social support received from strangers has less of an impact on survival and is less predictive of death and survival than social integration, having ongoing relationships with people, belonging to community, and having friends.
- “Data across 308,849 individuals, followed for an average of 7.5 years, indicates that individuals with adequate social relationships have a 50% greater likelihood of survival compared to those with poor or insufficient social relationships. The magnitude of this effect is comparable with quitting smoking and it exceeds many well-known risk factors for mortality (e.g., obesity, physical inactivity).”⁴
- “Multidimensional assessments of social integration yielded an even stronger association: a 91% increase in odds of survival. Thus, the magnitude of these findings may be considered quite large, rivaling that of well-established risk factors.”⁵

Please do not breeze over those last bullets. Take them in. Lacking meaningful, ongoing support from social relationships is worse for you than being obese and not exercising!! That’s what I’m seeing. Our very survival, our ability to stay alive increases 50% with adequate social relationships compared with those who are without. While I do not completely understand the multidimensional assessment (I admittedly struggled in statistics class), I am getting the point. Social integration is life giving. Isolation is deadly.

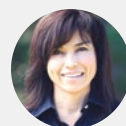
Science, health care, and the public media take risk factors such as obesity, smoking, diet, and exercise seriously.

Apparently we need to add social relationships to that list. We are deeply dependent upon each other. The early church understood this fact. Their lives were intertwined not only while worshipping, but the Bible tells us that they ate at each other’s homes and shared financial burdens. If anyone had need, they were there for one another. It was the experience that Jesus had prayed for, “that they all may be one” (John 17:21). The apostle Paul, though himself unmarried, understood the inestimable value of connectivity. He used the analogy of describing us as parts of a human body, unable to exist separate from each other. Even our spiritual survival is reliant on the support social relationships can provide.

Therefore, in light of this fact, let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, and not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Don’t neglect living in interconnected, inclusive community, getting together, stirring up love for each other. Exhort, encourage one another ESPECIALLY as you see the day approaching (Hebrews 10:25).

One of my favorite books is the *Ministry of Healing*. It depicts the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. There is counsel on healthful eating and living. And in it are chapters devoted to relationships, one of which is titled, *Living in Contact with Others*. This chapter shows how we can develop social relationships that will be truly health and life giving. Yes, Jesus has given you unique function. He desires for you to learn to stand in independence. Yes, He wants to have a personal relationship with you, but His abiding presence in you is to be like a gushing spring, refreshing all whom you come in contact with, imparting life. 🌿

1. J.S. House, K.R. Landis, and D. Umberson, “Social Relationships and Health,” *Science*, 1988, <http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>.
2. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith, J. Bradley Layton, “Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review,” *PLoS Med*, July 7, 2010, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2910600/>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.



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