

THE SURPRISING CONNECTION BETWEEN CLOSE FRIENDS AND GOOD HEALTH

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By Barbara Brody

Having close friends leads to many benefits. Sure, it's great to have someone in your life who shares your love of rom-coms and is always willing to give you a sympathetic ear. But the benefits of friendship are even greater than you may have thought. Turns out, friends play an important role in your physical and emotional health.

“Research indicates that lonely and socially isolated people tend to be less healthy and more likely to have a lifestyle that is not as health-promoting,” says Christopher Coe, Ph.D., director of the Harlow Center for Biological Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In other words, nurturing your friendships is one of the best things you can do for your health. Here are just a

few of the many benefits of friendship.

YOU'RE MORE LIKELY TO SUCCEED AT WEIGHT LOSS

Thinking of joining a new gym or trying a new healthy eating plan? You're more likely to stick with it and meet your goals if you can convince a few buddies to join you. [Research](#) presented at a meeting of the American Heart Association found that when groups of friends participated in an exercise and nutrition program together, they lost more weight compared to those who tried to slim down alone.

YOU'RE LESS LIKELY TO DEVELOP HEART DISEASE

Social isolation is a major risk factor for both heart attack and stroke, according to a recent study in *Heart*. The researchers found that adults with the fewest social ties were 29 percent more likely to have heart disease and 32 percent more likely to suffer a stroke.

YOU'LL HAVE BETTER LUCK MANAGING HEALTH CONDITIONS

People with serious ailments who go it alone are more apt to struggle. Friends might drive you to doctors' appointments, cook you dinner when you're not up for it, or just encourage you to take care of yourself. Some [research](#) even suggests that people with type 2 diabetes who have a strong support system maintain better control over their blood sugar levels.

YOU MIGHT LIVE LONGER

"Quality social relationships—which can include family relationships and friendships—have been found to lower mortality risk at levels comparable to other positive lifestyle factors such as not smoking and avoiding excessive alcohol consumption," says psychologist Jamila Bookwala, Ph.D., dean of curriculum and research at Lafayette College.

When researchers at Brigham Young University analyzed 70 different studies—which included info

from more than 3.4 million participants—they found that people who felt isolated were 29 percent more likely than those with solid social ties to die during the course of the studies. The researchers, who published their findings in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, noted that it's not only seniors who are in danger. In fact, middle-aged folks had an even greater risk of dying prematurely if they suffered from loneliness.

YOU'RE LESS LIKELY TO BE DEPRESSED

Perhaps it's no surprise that people who have a strong social network are less apt to suffer from clinical depression. But it's not enough to just exchange emails or chat on the phone. If you want to keep your mood up, seeing your close friends face-to-face in real life—not via Skype or FaceTime—is crucial. Research from the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* found that people who saw friends or loved ones at least once or twice a week were substantially less likely to be depressed than those who only had those sorts of interactions once or twice a month.

If your social circle seems a bit lacking, don't be afraid to branch out. Sign up for a book club, volunteer to lend a hand at your local community center or place of worship, take a [group exercise class](#) or simply invite a neighbor over for a cup of coffee.

And focus on quality. "Closeness of friendships and family relationships," says Bookwala, "is more important for health and well-being than the number of friends you have."



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