



Social Wellness and Your Health

Skills and Professional Development



I'm sure many can relate to growing up with the idea of "health" as exercise and eating well. *That's all you need — move around a little and nourish your body!* Simple, right?

Personally, I find that complicated enough! Let alone when you add in the aspects that balance the all-encompassing health: mental well-being, social connection, emotional health, spirituality... and the list goes on.

While the tables are turning in our modern world, there is still not enough importance placed on our emotional well-being and social connection. Research has shown that the "soft" drivers linked to emotional and social health — friendship, empathy, respect, kindness — can actually be *more* important than exercise and nutrition.

I wasn't convinced when I first heard this on the podcast [All in the Mind](#) (highly recommend). Surely my daily running routine is better for my health than talking to a friend?

Here's what I've learned since.

Connecting could help you live longer

Marta Zaraska, a Canadian-Polish science journalist, recently released the book [Growing Young: How Friendship, Optimism, and Kindness Can Help You Live to 100](#). Zaraska references stats that speak for themselves:

Studies show that building a strong support network of family and friends lowers mortality risk by about 45 percent. Exercise lowers that risk by only 33 percent.

As an avid health freak, these numbers fascinate me. Have I been focusing on the wrong pillars of health? Am I placing enough importance on the social side?

The more I thought about it the more it seemed to make perfect sense. We generally tend to feel better when we're around others. You can't deny that hit of dopamine when we hug or kiss a loved one. The "feel good" hormones are certainly in full swing when we connect socially. When released, these hormones naturally give us feelings of happiness, relaxation, improved mood, and lower levels of depression — undeniable positives to our overall health.

Volunteering is good for your health

Volunteering is reported to reduce the risk of dying early by 22-44 percent. Eating six servings of fruit and vegetables per day can cut the danger of dying early by 26 percent.

The volunteer statistic from Zaraska really speaks to me as I'm a volunteer for the Rural Fire Services. (What a busy start to 2020 we had!)

People often congratulate me on what a great thing I do volunteering my time to help the community. I often feel guilty for the kudos I receive – I can't deny that volunteering makes *me* feel good. It's almost a selfish act – I get such incredible feelings of fulfillment and gratitude through my volunteering. As it turns out, such feelings are actually really good for my health.

Unfortunately, the opposite is also true here for people who are lonely or socially isolated. This puts into question our overall health during this uncertain COVID-19 period, where we've been forced to lockdown and socially isolate. We must remember to view this as *physical* distance rather than *social* distance. Maintaining our social ties (even if we can't see each other in the flesh) is more important now than ever.

How to improve your social wellness

Build healthy relationships.

Take time to understand and acknowledge what a healthy relationship looks like and how to keep your connections supportive.

Maintain and nurture your current relationships.

Connect even if you're in isolation – try video calls, remote celebrations, or Zoom Trivia (my team name was "Quaranteam"). Even if it's a "forced" check-in with friends, family, or colleagues, it will help strengthen your (and their) emotional well-being.

Practice random acts of kindness.

It's incredible how much they can make you feel great. It might be holding the door open for someone at your local café, giving a stranger a smile as you walk past, or sharing a compliment. Even if it's something short and sweet, the impact can be endless.

Take a look inside.

Being socially confident often stems from a good relationship with ourselves. The better you know yourself, the more you can offer to those around you. Exercise self-care and start by being kind to you. This will help improve your mood, making it easier to connect with others.

Consider volunteering.

There are so many things you can do, little or big!

As it turns out, small changes can significantly improve our feelings of happiness and do a ton of good in the long run.

Don't get me wrong – the traditional pillars of health will always be important, but perhaps it's time they took a back seat. Your emotional fitness and strength are also important, and they can contribute to an overall happier, healthier, and more content life.

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