

Connect Well for Health

Social life may play a larger role in a person's health than one might think. A recent study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill made a concrete connection between living a longer, healthier life, and maintaining social connections.

The first of its kind, the study connected relationships with real measures of physical well-being, including high blood pressure, abdominal obesity and inflammation — health issues that can lead to long-term problems like heart disease, stroke and cancer. The research builds upon previous work that found older adults live longer if they have more social connections. Researchers said the conclusions from this study were even more promising — determining that a person's social relationships play a role in decreasing health risk.

Dr. Sudhir Gokhale, a psychiatrist at Advocate Christ Medical Center and Advocate Children's Hospital in Oak Lawn, IL, echoes the importance of social relationships at all stages of life. "The effect of emotional health on physical well-being is being understood more and more clearly as research continues," says Dr. Gokhale. "This particular study points out the importance of quality and supportive relationships in life.

Feeling connected with others seems to be showing a strong positive influence on reducing the risk of depressive disorders," he says. "And now we know it also has a strong impact on various physical parameters." Dr. Gokhale stresses that physicians and health care providers should also emphasize the significance of social relationships on health as much as advocating for eating right and exercising.

Prayer: *Holy One, you created us to live in community. May we take care to nurture our relationships with each other and bring love and care to those who are alone.*

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Faith Communities Support Social Relationships

Recent science affirms that having positive social connections is critically important for people's health--on par with eating well and being physically active. Building community and teaching about positive ways for us to relate to each other is the natural work of faith communities of all religious traditions. In a study conducted by Advocate's Congregational Health Partnerships program, congregations demonstrated 11 ways that they nurture social connection among their members and in their communities.

1. **Noticing and Inviting**—Members notice people who are new, hurting or alone and connect them with others and with opportunities to lead and participate;
2. **Practical Support**—Systems exist to offer food, transportation, child care, etc. in times of crisis or on-going need;
3. **Intergenerational Relationships**—Adults know children and children feel known and appreciated. Children have leadership roles;
4. **Faith leader-led Community-Building**—The faith leader models, educates and coaches ways to build relationships among members;
5. **Informal Socializing**—There are opportunities for people to be together informally and for people to gather outside of their usual group;
6. **Learning Together**—Regular times for learning, both spiritually and about issues of concern, and for teaching each other;
7. **Sacred Intimacy and Belongingness**—Spaces exist for people to share deeply with each other about their lives, struggles and hopes;
8. **Worship Life**—There are religious practices that help us connect with each other and that actively use music and the arts;
9. **Community Outreach**—Members have relationships with people living in the community. The congregation participates with initiatives that are priorities for the community;
10. **Mission and Social Justice**—The congregation uses its influence to improve conditions for people in their community or around the world;
11. **Small groups**—Members gather in formal and informal small groups and intentional gatherings around common concerns or experiences.

What are the ways that your faith community supports social connections? What more can you do? What do you do that is not on this list?

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