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A Dose of Closeness



Connecting with friends is good medicine

FINDING OUT THAT FRIENDSHIPS are good for your health is like learning that chocolate is the foundation of healthy eating. How hard can it be to make something so enjoyable a priority?

As much as you may want to put time with friends high on your list of things to do, many other responsibilities vie for your time: Work. Laundry. Family. Laundry. Kids' activities. (And there's always laundry.)

But who's too busy to do something that keeps you happier, healthier and more resilient to stress?

Connect with the Benefits

"Human beings have a very strong need to belong," says Georgianna Donadio, Ph.D., program director of the National Institute of Whole Health.

"Strong social networks give you a sense of purpose and belonging that has a profound effect on your well-being."

Many research studies have linked being socially integrated—participating in a broad range of social relationships—with better physical and mental health. Socially integrated people:

- Live longer
- Are more likely to survive heart attacks
- Have less risk of cancer recurrence
- Have less upper respiratory illness
- Have less depression and anxiety, and less severe cognitive decline as they age

Stay Immune to Stress

Feeling connected to a social support network nurtures a healthy immune system. First-year college students who felt lonely or were socially isolated were less protected by the flu vaccine than other students, according to a 2005 study in the journal *Health Psychology*.

Chronically lonely people actually experience changes in genes involved with immunity, according to a 2007 study in the journal *Genome Biology*. This helps explain to researchers why feeling isolated is linked with a higher risk of heart disease, viral infections and cancer.

“Any time you reduce stress, you have less disease,” Donadio says. “Feeling that you have friends who care about you and people whose lives you contribute to is a real stress-killer.”

Find Friend Time

Sure, it can be tough for busy women to stay connected to their friends. But what are you missing when you don't do it?

“I challenge people to ask themselves, ‘What price am I paying when I feel disconnected from my support system?’” says Corrie Woods, women's self-care coach and author of *The Woman's Field Guide to Exceptional Living*.

Say no to say yes. “Learn how to say no to things in your current schedule so you can make time for friends,” Woods says. Decide what supports your overall well-being and make those things a priority.

Get goal oriented. Look for ways to achieve personal goals while building relationships. Want to get fit or develop your creative side? Set up a regular walking date with a friend, or get a group together to sign up for drawing lessons.

Reach out for new connections. To meet new friends, take a class, join a club or volunteer for a cause you believe in. “These are great ways to meet like-minded people,” Woods says.

Relax together. Schedule a girls' night out at Massage Envy to get massages at the same time. Extend the relaxation by going out for tea or coffee afterward.

Choose to celebrate. Finally unpack that last box from your move? Did your friend get a promotion? Is today your favorite author's birthday? “Take note and observe the things that might slide by unnoticed,” Woods says. Any excuse to create a special occasion gives you a reason to have fun with your friends.

—By Teresa Caldwell Board

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