

A Good Friend is Good for Your Health

Linda Hamilton-Korey

Most of us would agree that it is nice to have good relationships with friends and family. But did you know that good relationships can be good for your health? According to scientists, friendship boosts the immune system. Also, good friends support us to go to the doctor and to take care of ourselves.

Even if we don't have a specific medical concern, friends support our physical and mental health in other ways: They are with us when we are lonely, laugh with us when we are happy, listen to us when we need to talk, and comfort us when we are overwhelmed. In my life, my family and friends have nurtured me, protected me, and shaped me into a more whole and healthier person. Sometimes just being with friends gives us a feeling of well-being.

Of course, negative relationships affect people just as deeply, but in a destructive way. If I am in an abusive or controlling relationship, the hurt will become a tattoo on me that I will carry with me. If I spend a lot of time relating to people who are mean-spirited or who gossip or treat others unkindly, I can't be my own best self. When we are in relationships that are basically "sick" in nature, we can become physically and mentally ill ourselves.

During the last 25 years, research has shown that there is a connection between having friends and enjoying better health. There is "preliminary evidence" suggesting that people who suffer from

cardiovascular disease, cancer, and infectious disease, have a lower mortality rate if they have dependable friends and family. One researcher wrote, "Relationships are an essential part of health... Isolation and loneliness create responses in the body similar to those of stress. The body [functions better] when we are connected to other people."

Scientists will continue trying to measure the benefits of friendships. But for the rest of us, doesn't it seem like common sense that a strong social network, a loving family, and solid friendships make us healthier? We all benefit from having friends who will walk with us, encourage us to lose weight, remind us to go to the doctor, watch our kids while we get the test done, share healthy recipes, and let us vent. When we are sick, our friends support us. They might cook for us, clean for us, or just sit with us. They remind us that we are not alone. Having friends brings health and wholeness into our lives.

Sources: Uchino, *Social Support and Physical Health*, 2004, Yale University Press; Stibich, "The Impact of Relationships on Aging, Longevity, and Health," 2007.



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Activities

1. Discuss relationships that support you and make you feel good. Write about a friend who supports you or how you support a friend. Do you think friendships make you healthier?
2. Discuss relationships that are hurtful. What can people do to get out of them or change them?
3. Write about a friendship that has been important to you.