

Connect for Health

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I'm sure many can relate to my experience of 'health' growing up – it's all about exercise and eating well. That's all you need. Move 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 wellbeing, social connection, emotional health, spirituality... and the list goes on.



Whilst the tables are shifting in this modern world, there is still not enough importance placed on our emotional wellbeing and social connection. Research has shown that the 'soft' drivers linked to emotional & social health – friendship, empathy, respect, kindness – can actually be *more* important than exercise and nutrition.

I won't lie - when I first heard of this, on the ABC Podcast '*All in the Mind*'¹ (highly recommend!), I wasn't convinced. Really? Surely my daily running routine is better for my health than talking to a friend? Hmm. This got me thinking, especially in the current COVID-19 situation where social isolation seems to be our 'new normal'.

Marta Zaraska, a Canadian-Polish science journalist, recently released a book called '*Growing Young: How Friendship, Optimism and Kindness Can Help You Live to 100*'². Ms 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%.
- This can be compared to exercise, which can lower that risk by only 33%.
- Eating six servings of fruit and veg per day can cut the danger of dying early by 26%.
- Compare this to volunteering, which is reported to reduce the risk of dying early by 22-44%.

As an avid health freak, this fascinates 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 themselves naturally gives us feelings of happiness, relaxation, improved mood, and lower levels of depression – undeniable positives to our overall health.

The volunteer statistic really speaks to me. 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 fulfilment and gratitude through my volunteering. As it turns out, such feelings are actually really good for my health.

¹ You can access the podcast here: <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/allinthemind/>.

² Marta Zaraska, *Growing Young: How Friendship, Optimism, and Kindness Can Help You Live to 100*, Robinson, 1 edition (11 August 2020).

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 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.

Here are some tips to help improve our 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 – 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 wellbeing.
- **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 & 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. Yet perhaps it's time they took a back seat and we all take time to understand how important our emotional fitness & strength is, and how it can contribute to an overall happier, healthier and more content life.