

Social Support: A Buffer Against Life's Ills

This article first appeared in the Mayo Clinic "Housecall", a free e-mail newsletter for the health consumer found at: <http://www.mayoclinic.com>. It reports that social activities can offer a psychological buffer against stress, anxiety and depression. Social support, including family, friends and regular social activities can also help protect us against developing an illness and can help us cope better with medical problems. It may even increase our life span.

Social support in broad terms includes "talking with a friend over a cup of coffee, visiting a relative or going on an outing with a church or club". These activities are good for our overall health. Social interaction can also increase our sense of belonging, purpose and self-worth, thus promoting positive mental health. It can also help us get through a divorce, a job loss or the death of a loved one. Just knowing someone is available to talk with can reduce negative emotional and behavioral responses to stressful events or other problems.

Social isolation is the opposite and is detrimental to our health. It can contribute to depression and undermine our self-esteem and sense of purpose. Social isolation can also lead to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. This article warns against abusing these social relationships with excessive complaints about our health and to avoid those relationships that place heavy demands on our time and resources.

The Social Support article gives several ideas for fostering or maintaining relationships. It says that healthy social ties involve give and take. Sometimes we are the one giving support and other times we are on the receiving end. It suggests some areas that might help cultivate healthful relationships:

Get out with our pets. Seek out a dog park or make conversation with those who stop to talk.

Do lunch. Or breakfast or dinner, at least once a month and invite an acquaintance to join you.

Join a hobby group. Find a nearby group with similar interests in such things as music, books, crafts (or post-polio).

Volunteer. Hospitals, churches, museums, community centers, school mentoring programs and other organizations often need volunteers. We can form strong connections when we work with people toward a mutual goal.

Suggested guidelines while we are nurturing our social support system:

Go easy. Don't overwhelm friends and family with phone calls or e-mails. Communication can be brief – five minutes on the phone or several sentences for e-mail.

Don't compete with others. This might turn potential friends into potential rivals.

Adopt a healthy, realistic self-image. Both vanity and avoid relentless complaining. Nonstop complaining is tiresome and can be draining on support systems.

Adopt a positive outlook. Try to find the humor in things.

Listen. Make a point to remember what's going on in the lives of others. Then relate any interests or experiences you have in common. Sharing details about our life can also help to establish rapport.

Social connections provide a sense of belonging, security and a welcoming forum in which to share our concerns and needs. Plus, we may get as much or even more out of friendships and social networks when we are the source of comfort and companionship.

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Here's an Anti-Aging Strategy: GO SHOPPING

Isn't that an intriguing title? This article concerning our mental outlook appeared in the newsletter "Brain in the News", published by the Dana Foundation. It first appeared in the Baltimore Sun.

The article postulates that one reason women usually outlive men is that women do more shopping. The authors explain that shopping provides three essential ingredients for a healthy life: physical activity, mental activity and gratification.

When we go shopping it requires that we leave the house (internet shopping doesn't count) and move about throughout the store. This increases our physical activity level. Shopping also requires that we use our mind. We must decide if one item is a better buy than another or if a color will clash with the other colors in our wardrobe. And, finally, we get a sense of gratification or enhanced self-image. All three are essential for well-balanced living.

In contrast, the author portrays many men as couch potatoes. As their wives are active, mentally alert and have enhanced their self-image, the husbands are sitting at home, watching TV and living life vicariously through their favorite sports teams

While PPS might have limited our ability to do strenuous activity, it is still important to be as active as possible. We are not limited in the ways we can use our brain, or what we can do to maintain a positive outlook.

Maybe we should conduct a PPS study to verify that this theory is true. Any volunteers???