



## DO SOCIAL TIES AFFECT OUR HEALTH?

### *Exploring the Biology of Relationships*

Cuddles, kisses, and caring conversations. These are key ingredients of our close relationships. Scientists are finding that our links to others can have powerful effects on our health. Whether with romantic partners, family, friends, neighbors, or others, social connections can influence our biology and well-being.

Wide-ranging research suggests that strong social ties are linked to a longer life. In contrast, loneliness and social isolation are linked to poorer health, depression, and increased risk of early death.

Studies have found that having a variety of social relationships may help reduce stress and heart-related risks. Such connections might improve your ability to fight off germs or give you a more positive outlook on life. Physical contact—from hand-holding to sex—can trigger release of hormones and brain chemicals that not only make us feel great but also have other biological benefits.

#### **WHAT SCIENCE SAYS ABOUT MARRIAGE**

Marriage is one of the most-studied social bonds. “For many people, marriage is their most important relationship. And the evidence is very strong that marriage is generally good for health,” says Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, an expert on health and relationships at Ohio State University. “But if a relationship isn’t going well, it could have significant health-related consequences.”

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Married couples tend to live longer and have better heart health than unmarried couples. Studies have found that when one spouse improves his or her health behaviors—

such as by exercising, drinking or smoking less, or getting a flu shot—the other spouse is likely to do so, too.

When marriages are full of conflict, though, such health benefits may shrink. Couples with the “double-whammy” of hostile marriages and depression may also be at risk for weight problems. After eating a high-fat meal and discussing a difficult topic, these troubled couples tended to burn fewer calories than less hostile counterparts. “The metabolism in these couples was slower in ways that could account for weight gain across time,” Kiecolt-Glaser says. Compared to the kinder couples, the distressed spouses had signs of more fat storage and other risks for heart disease.

The quality of a marriage—whether supportive or hostile—may be especially important to the health of

older couples. Dr. Hui Liu at Michigan State University studied data on the health and sexuality of more than 2,200 older people, ages 57 to 85. Good marriage quality, she found, is linked to reduced risk of developing cardiovascular disease, while bad marriage quality is tied to increased risk, particularly in women. “The association between marriage quality and heart health becomes increasingly strong at older ages,” Liu says.

Other types of relationships are important, too. These can include friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, clubs, and religious groups. Studies have found that people who have larger and more diverse types of social ties tend to live longer. They also tend to have better physical and mental health than people with fewer such relationships. Social support may be especially protective during difficult times.



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## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Social connections might help protect health and lengthen life. Look for ways to get involved with others:

- » Join a group focused on a favorite hobby, such as reading, hiking, painting, or wood carving.
- » Take a class in yoga, tai chi, or another new physical activity.
- » Help with gardening at a community garden or park.
- » Volunteer at a school, library, hospital, or place of worship.
- » Join a local community group or find other ways to get involved in things you care about.