

THE LEARNING BRAIN

Each week in BCPVPA eNews, we share tips, links and self-assessment tools that will help our members to better understand the mental health continuum, and to use the resources that are available.

bcpvpa.bc.ca/thelearningbrain

Friday May 22, 2020

INVESTING IN RELATIONSHIPS WHILE SOCIAL DISTANCING

By Rochelle Morandini



RELATIONSHIPS

Definition: Relationships are ‘the way in which two or more people are connected, or the state of being connected’. Relationships include the intimate relationships we have with our respective partners, those we form with our parents, siblings, and grandparents, and those we form socially with our friends, work colleagues, teachers, healthcare professionals and community. ¹

Relationships are essential to our psychological and physical health, yet we are often left, through trial and error, to figure out how to find and maintain them. One would think that if relationships are something so crucial to our humanity, that we would invest more into making our relationships successful.

As I am sure you will agree, even when a minor relationship becomes troubled, our lives are potentially disrupted, and our sense of happiness and fulfillment can deteriorate.²

¹ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/relationships-21st-century-forgotten-foundation-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

² <https://www.theresilientmind.life/resources/>



A positive relationship can be shared between any two people who love, support, encourage and help each other [practically as well as emotionally](#). You will find that people in healthy relationships often:

- ***Listen to each other***
- ***Communicate openly and without judgment***
- ***Trust and respect each other***
- ***Consistently make time for each other***
- ***Remember details about each other's lives***
- ***Engage in healthy activities together***

Watch this [video on Social Well Being – the Importance of Social Connections](#).

However, not all relationships are beneficial. It is the quality of our relationships that matters. Poor-quality relationships can be toxic and worse for our mental health than being alone. Research shows that people in unhappy or negative relationships have significantly worse outcomes than those who are isolated or have no relationships.



Josh Appel - unsplash.com

Why is fostering relationships so important?

Studies have shown that people who are more socially connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected.

As a society and as individuals, we should be prioritizing the investment in building and maintaining good relationships and tackling the barriers to forming them. We invest in physical activity and healthy eating, but do we put in targeted efforts to improve our health through positive relationships? Maintaining a healthy social support network is hard work and something that requires ongoing effort over time.³

³ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/relationships-21st-century-forgotten-foundation-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

Relationships benefit us in many ways, including: ⁴

- ***Help us maintain a sense of hope***
- ***Help us reach our full potential***
- ***Provide safety***
- ***Build self-esteem***
- ***Help us regulate our emotions***
- ***Fulfill our need for intimacy***

[See this article](#) that provides more detail on an additional 5 benefits of a healthy relationship.



The impact of a lack of relationships

Our challenge at this exact moment is that due to the pandemic, we find ourselves in ‘forced isolation’ which can be detrimental to our well-being and makes investing in our relationships difficult. “Absence of face-to-face contact and physical contact is likely to produce symptoms of depression and anxiety,” says Lawrence A. Palinkas, PhD, a professor of social policy and health as well as medical anthropology at the University of Southern California.

We rely heavily on our social interactions for our self-esteem and as a crucial source of psychological stimulation. “It creates a diverse social environment that helps us to maintain optimal cognitive functions,” says Dr. Palinkas, who notes that people who are isolated for extended periods of time may face short-term memory loss and difficulty exercising executive function.

⁴ <https://www.theresilientmind.life/resources/>



“Surround yourself with people that reflect who you want to be and how you want to feel — energies are contagious.”

- Rachel Molchin

Dr. Leach points to ‘the looking glass effect’. Our sense of self is determined to some extent by interaction with others, he says, so when we lose that interaction, ‘psychological disintegration’ can result.⁵

This made me think of the character Chuck (played by Tom Hanks) in the movie, **Castaway**, who upon finding himself alone on a deserted island, saw a face in his bloody handprint on a volleyball and created Wilson. His unique relationship with Wilson helped Chuck go above his emotional reactions to use critical thinking, to improve decision-making, to spur his motivation, to have hope, and even to reflect on himself.

If you have ever watched the movie, you may remember the gut-wrenching scene when he loses Wilson to the ocean and repeatedly yells, “I am so sorry, Wilson”. Even we, the movie audience, blinking our tears back, have developed a relationship with Wilson! See Chuck’s relationship with Wilson in this [short video clip](#)!

Studies show that loneliness takes a serious toll on your emotional and physical health. In fact, one study found that being lonely was as lethal as smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

A review of 148 studies concluded that “the influence of social relationships on the risk of death are comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality such as smoking and alcohol consumption and exceed the influence of other risk factors such as physical inactivity and obesity” and that “physicians, health professionals, educators, and the media should [...] take social relationships as seriously as other risk factors that affect mortality.”⁶

⁵ <https://www.wellandgood.com/good-advice/social-isolation-effects-on-mental-health/>

⁶ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/relationships-21st-century-forgotten-foundation-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

It is important to note that addressing loneliness does not just mean being around people – someone could regularly be surrounded by people and still be lonely. It is more about forming deep connections with other people.



How we interact and form relationships has changed considerably over the past decade. For example, unlike in the past when we stayed and contributed solely within our community, we now often move away from our towns and neighbourhoods. This creates distance between us and family and friends. We are not as 'available' to pop by, offer support, or ask for help. The development and reliance on online technologies, our longer working hours, and changes in how we even define community have impacted how we foster relationships.

There is evidence that a lack of social support can be associated with poor mental health. People who are clinically depressed report lower levels of social support than people who are not currently depressed. It is likely that lack of social support and feelings of loneliness can make us more vulnerable to the onset of mental health or substance-use problems like depression.

However, many of us will pull away from other people when we are experiencing mental health or substance-use problems. In this way, mental health or substance use problems can lead to problems with social support and aggravate our feelings of loneliness. For these reasons, reconnecting with others in healthy, supportive ways is often an important component of managing most mental health or substance-use problems.

<https://www.cmhaff.ca/social-support>

Fabrizio Verrecchi- unsplash.com



Investing in relationships

The more a relationship is valued, the greater the pain experienced when there is a fracture in the relationship. Although small day-to-day conflicts may not cause deep hurt or pain, ongoing unresolved conflict will. The cumulative effect of stress and strain can become a fracture on its own.

Relationship fractures threaten the foundation of boundaries and trust. Strong foundations are needed to create the atmosphere of intimacy necessary for a person to be and to become who they truly are.⁷



Ideally, we can avoid relationship fractures by investing in our relationships. For many of us, our approach to building and maintaining relationships is passive – it is something we do subconsciously and without deliberate effort. We often overlook that it requires an investment of time to maintain good relationships. Here are five things you can do to invest in your relationships!

- 1. Give time:** put more time aside to connect with friends and family.
- 2. Be present:** it can be tempting to check your phone, Facebook messages or even work emails when with family and friends. Try to be present in the moment and be there for your loved ones, and switch out of work mode whenever possible.
- 3. Listen:** actively listen to what others are saying in a non-judgemental way and concentrate on their needs in that moment.

⁷ <https://www.theresilientmind.life/resources/>

4. **Be listened to:** share how you are feeling, honestly, and allow yourself to be listened to and supported.
5. **Recognise unhealthy relationships:** being around positive people can make us happier; however, our wellbeing can be negatively affected by harmful relationships, leaving us unhappy. Recognising this can help us move forward and find solutions to issues.⁸



Building Social Connections While Social Distancing

Quality of relationships is more important than quantity. Having 3 – 4 close relationships with people you trust and respect are better than having 300 on Facebook! During this pandemic, much of our social interaction is on online video meeting apps like Zoom. Assuming your online relationships are good, this form of connecting is better than no interaction. Hopefully, you have video calls with those relationships that mean the most to you — not just from work!

However, communicating over phones and computers is not the same as being face-to-face and in the same room as someone. It is the neurochemical response that occurs during face-to-face interactions that contributes to our wellbeing.

As restrictions are easing this week, where it is safe for you, take advantage of small gatherings where you can interact with others without a screen in between. Get better acquainted with neighbours, reach out to old friends, or meet someone for coffee.

DEVELOPING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

We have established that strong social support is important to staying psychologically healthy. There are many types of social support including these from the [Here to Help website](#)⁹:

Emotional Support

This is what people often think of when they talk about social support. People are emotionally supportive when they listen to you, show empathy, and tell you that they care about you. For example, if you separated from your partner or lost your job, a close friend might offer you physical comfort, such as a hug or call every day for the first few weeks afterwards just to see how you are doing.

Practical Help

People who care about you might give you practical help or services, such as gifts of money or food, help with cooking or child care, or help moving house. This kind of support helps you complete tasks in your daily life and ease some of the daily stressors you may experience.

Sharing Points of View

Some people help by expressing their confidence in you or by encouraging you. They may remind you of your strengths and help you maintain a helpful and realistic perspective of the situation. For example, a classmate might remind you of your strengths as a speaker and your past successes before an important presentation at school.

Sharing information

It can be very helpful when family, friends or even experts give factual information or share their point of view on a particular situation. For example, a friend who recently married might provide information on the cost of their wedding and tips on how to stick to your budget, someone who has previously lost their job may share resources for networking or tips on coping with the change, or a cancer survivor might provide information on different types of cancer treatments.

Many of the people in your life can provide social support. These can include your parents, spouse or partner, children, siblings, other family members, friends, co-workers, neighbours, health professionals, support groups, and sometimes even strangers. Different people in your life may provide different kinds of support, so it's unlikely that one person can provide all the support you need.

If you want to build up your social circle, [see this video about ideas to become more social.](#)

For even more ideas, [check out this article on 'how do I improve my social network?'](#)



**WHAT OTHER HEALTH
TOPICS DO YOU WANT TO
LEARN MORE ABOUT?**



Let us know on our Twitter
and Instagram this week!
Follow **@bcpvpa** to read,
engage, share and comment!

Next week

**When Someone You Care
About Has a Mental Illness**



Joseph Pearson -
unsplash.com

Get in touch! If you have any questions about The Learning Brain series, contact
Rochelle Morandini rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca 604-689-3399