

Connectedness and Self-care

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Emma Parkhurst and Zuri Garcia



While most of us are familiar with self-care activities like eating healthy foods, exercising or managing stress, an often overlooked form of self-care is social connection. Feeling connected with others leads to a positive sense of well-being socially, emotionally, and physically, so it's no wonder that our personal relationships play a huge role in our overall life satisfaction! Numerous studies show that there is a higher average level of positive feelings associated with spending time with friends, as well as many other benefits including:

- **Reduced depression and anxiety** - For years, researchers have found that interpersonal connectedness may help lower risk of depression and anxiety.
- **Boosted immune system** - Not only can having a strong social network positively affect how well we sleep, our impulse control, and blood pressure, it may also help heal wounds faster and strengthen the immune response. Research by Steve Cole found that the genes impacted by social connection also code for immune function and inflammation.
- **Improved memory** - Researchers at Ohio State University of Columbus have found that simply having a larger social network can have a positive impact on the aging brain; meaning social interaction could protect against cognitive decline. Additional studies have shown that those with the most social

interaction within their community experience the slowest rate of memory decline.

- **Other general benefits** - One landmark study showed that a lack of social connection is a greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure.

So how can we start to include social connection into self-care? Try out some of these tips to increase your connectedness:

- **Practice empathy:** empathy is the ability to acknowledge, understand, and share the feelings or experiences of another. It's putting the old saying, "put yourself in their shoes" to work. It has been found that empathy is a critical quality in developing and nurturing connectedness as it helps to build both closeness and respect. To practice empathy, give your full attention to someone when they're talking, repeat what they say in your own words to make sure you understand them correctly, and validate his or her emotions regardless of whether or not you agree with them.
- **Make new connections:** look for new ways to get involved with others by joining a group focused on a favorite hobby, taking a class to try something new, volunteering at a community garden, school, or shelter, participating in neighborhood events, or joining a local community group.
- **Nurturing existing connections:** reach out to those you already have a connection with and strengthen that friendship or relationship by planning a recurring get-together like a game night or a pickup game. Some tips to build or maintain healthy relationships include sharing your feelings honestly, listen to others without judgement or blame, and that golden rule: treat others how you would like to be treated.
- **Think outward:** this is all about changing the focus from me to you. It can be instantly gratifying when someone does something kind for us or makes us feel special – so why not put that in practice for others around you? Intentionally thinking outward and seeing what you can do for others is a great place to start. Put your smart devices away and try to focus on the quality time with others. Better yet, do something together that benefits others such as volunteering or mentoring. Jumpstart your self-care and celebrate Random Acts of Kindness Day this February 17th and do something nice for a friend or two.

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