

July Wellness: Social Sustainability—Is it Real?

By Anne Praino

For the past several months we have been dealing with an event many of us never imagined we would experience in our lifetime; a global pandemic. It seemed like overnight, our lifestyle changed dramatically. Normal daily activities were no longer permitted, a fear of the other and the unseen consumed our thoughts, and our friends and family became unsafe to spend time with, to visit or to hug. This new normal is referred to as “social distancing”, and while necessary in protecting our physical well-being it may have adversely affected our social wellness.



July is Social Wellness Month. Social Wellness refers to the relationships we have and how we interact with others. It involves building healthy, nurturing and supportive relationships as well as fostering a genuine connection with those around you. The concept seems so obvious until we examine what is involved in building these relationships and why it's so important. According to the University of Minnesota, the health risks from being alone or isolated in one's life are comparable to the risks associated with cigarette smoking, high blood pressure and obesity. It's incredible to think that the physical risk of being alone can compare to the health risks of cigarette smoking, especially as we all emerge from a four-month isolation. So in light of this reality, we want to be proactive in restoring this aspect of our personal well-being. (Osborne, 2019)

So let's dive in. First off, **social wellness takes three forms; emotional, instrumental and informational.** Emotional support refers to the actions people take to make someone feel cared for. Examples include hugs or holding someone's hand, or just listening to or empathizing while someone else talks. The idea is to make someone feel cared for. Instrumental refers to physical (or tangible) support such as helping someone financially or aiding in practical matters such as housekeeping. Finally, informational support is just what it sounds like—providing information in an effort to help another which may take the form of personal advice or sharing instructions. (University of Minnesota, n.d.)

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So now that we know what it is, what is the benefit? Research shows that people with healthy relationships tend to deal more effectively with stress. The logical train of thought might be simply that feeling alone in the face of difficult times would only increase one's anxiety, but those connections actually affect us on a biological level--helping the heart and blood pressure respond better to stressful situations. In addition, having a strong social network is associated with a healthier endocrine system and healthier cardiovascular functioning. (Be Your Healthiest Best, n.d.) Finally, and most importantly to mention at this time, research is suggesting that healthy social networks may actually enhance the immune system's ability to fight off infectious diseases. Social support can provide certain physiological benefits such as improved immune functioning, reduced risk of chronic illness, faster healing times, higher cancer survival rates, reduced physiological impact of stress, and much more. We are only just beginning to understand the importance of social support and how it can reduce symptoms of physical diseases and mental illness. (American Counseling Association, 2016)

We have covered the bases of what it is and what it does, which leads to how we do it and our monthly challenge. Methods of improving social wellness are relatively easy, but will force many of us to step out of our comfort zones. **You can join gym or a fitness class rather than working out in your own home; take up a hobby, that secret passion you never actually manifested and find others who make time to do it together; volunteer for an organization so you can meet like-minded individuals who feel the mission is as important as you do; call an old friend from high school or college and catch up or simply make a point to sit and have dinner with the family one night a week and talk, really talk to each other. These are just some ideas you can start with or find one of your own, but the challenge this month is to try one of them.** This challenge will require intention, energy and a little extra time on your part, but the benefits far outweigh the efforts and may be exactly what the doctor ordered. (Institute, n.d.)

Sources

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