

A Prescription for Health: Friends

**Pamela A. Popper, President
Wellness Forum Health**

It is true that eating an optimal diet and exercising are necessary in order to achieve optimal health. But there are other factors impacting health that deserve more attention. For example, having a rich social life has a greater impact on health than quitting smoking. Membership in clubs and political organizations, religious observation, close ties with family and friends, and going places and doing things are not just fun, but essential for achieving health. One analysis of 148 studies showed that the benefit of social integration was as important as other well-known strategies for reducing risk of mortality and risk was reduced by as much as 50% for those with stronger social relationships.¹ Close friendships can reduce the risk of chronic disease and result in higher levels of happiness in addition to reducing mortality.^{2 3}

People who cultivate friendships instead of relying primarily on family for social activities benefit even more. A study of 6500 people in the UK showed that people who have 10 or more friends at age 45 have significantly better psychological well-being than people who have fewer friends.⁴ Apparently friendships have a dose-dependent effect on psychological health.

The older we get, the more important our friendships become. The quality of relationships is important too. While relationships help to protect health, strain from friendships has an opposite effect and increases the risk of chronic illness over time.⁵ So your mother's advice about the importance of the company you keep was right!

If you are married, having strong social connections benefits not only you but your spouse. In a study of older people, those who socialized with friends more frequently had fewer depressive symptoms, and the same was true for their significant others.⁶ In fact, several studies have shown that relationships between spouses and significant others are better when both partners maintain several friendships.

These studies are consistent with Dan Buettner's accounts of people living in the Blue Zones. One of the strategies reported to contribute to the longevity of people living in these areas was social relationships with friends in addition to family members.⁷

So, what to do if COVID has upended your life and many of your usual social connections, and the organizations to which you used to belong are gone? First, take a minute to feel sad - these separations are painful. I know this because I have experienced this myself. One healthcare advocacy organization I used to belong to enthusiastically jabs patients and demands proof of vaccination for attendance at conferences. I was associated with an arts organization for decades that now requires vaccination for all performers and audience members. I'm not associated with either of

these groups anymore and will not be returning – ever. A big chunk out of my life – gone!

Many of my colleagues are now former colleagues, and a few friends are still around, but by the middle of last summer my world had become a lot smaller.

This is sad and I felt sad. But I also felt compelled to do something about it. Not just because scientific articles show that I'm better off being around more people, but because I like people and I'm happier when I spend time with them. The answer was to find new organizations and new friends and new projects and new activities. We all can do this if we just look around for opportunities.

One member shared that she started attending government and school board meetings. She did not expect anything to change – the criminals in charge have made up their minds about what they want to do and citizen input is just annoying to them. Rather she attended because it was a way to meet like-minded people and make new friends.

Many people have either started or joined Thursday group meetings for Make Americans Free Again. At these meetings they have met new friends, found new churches, connected with parents who are home schooling, and volunteered for projects that help others.

Farmers' markets, festivals, outdoor concerts, and activities that do not require compliance with nonsense are also great places to meet new people. And once you make a few new contacts, you can meet others through them.

One of the worst things our rulers did to us was to separate us from one another. They did this deliberately, because they knew it would be psychologically harmful, and also because they thought it would keep us from organizing against them. When we remain alone and miserable they win, and this should be unacceptable to us.

So go find new people and new opportunities and gather a new tribe. I did. And I'm happier now than I was before this all happened. I have more in common with my new social circle, and the things I'm working on now are much more impactful than anything I've done in the past. There can be life after COVID – if we want it and will go find it!

¹ Holt-Lunstad J, Smith T, Layton JB. "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review." *PLoS* 2010 Jul <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

² Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. "Social relationships and mortality risk: A Meta-analytic review." *PLoS Med* 20107(7):e10000316

³ Saphire-Bernstein S, Taylor SE. "Close relationships and subjective well-being. In I. Boniwell & S. David (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of happiness* (pp821-833). London, England: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Cable N, Bartley M, Chandola T, Sacker A. "Friends are equally important to men and women, but family matters more for men's well-being." *J Epidem Comm Health* 2012;67(2)

⁵ Chopik W. "Associations among relational values, support, health, and well-being across the adult lifespan." *Pers Relat* 2017;24:408-422

⁶ Han SH, Kim K, Burr J. "Friendship and Depression Among couples in Later Life: The Moderating Effects of Marital Quality." *J Gerntol Series B* 2017 Apr <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbx046>

⁷ Janice Lloyd. "Blue Zones author: 9 secrets to live a long life." *USA Today* November 4 2012