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Friends: Good for Your Health

How often do you cancel a lunch date with a friend? If you do it occasionally, it might not matter much. But do it repeatedly and you could endanger your health.

When we find ourselves too busy to maintain friendships, we run the risk of losing our social support when we need it most. Our health—physical and mental—suffers when we are isolated.

The quality and quantity of individuals' social relationships has been linked not only to mental health but also to both morbidity and mortality, report the authors of *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review*.¹

Their research shows that lacking social connections is as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Realities of Busyness

Perceived busyness can prevent us from making and keeping friends, says Andrea Bonior, Ph.D., author of *The Friendship Fix: The Complete Guide to Choosing, Losing, and Keeping Up With Your Friends*.

¹ Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB (2010) Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review. *PLoS Med* 7(7): e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316 Accessed July 26, 2016

Bonior is a licensed clinical psychologist on the faculty of Georgetown University.

“Friendship ends up at the bottom of our priority totem pole. We have so much to do at home after work. Then with technology at our fingertips, we tend to stay connected to work even when we’re not there. We think we don’t have time to get together with friends. Or we feel guilty about making time for friends.”

Yet friendships should be a health priority, says Bonior. “We know that strong social support can lengthen our lifespan, speed our recovery from illness, and minimize depression. Loneliness is bad for the immune system and the heart. So friendships should be treated like the other things that get high priority in our lives.”

Gina Calhoun is National Director for Wellness and Recovery Education at the Copeland Center for Wellness and Recovery in Brattleboro, Vermont. She brings to that role her personal story of overcoming mental health challenges.



“When I first started my job, I slept with my Blackberry next to me,” she says. “I had to back up and remember that my job was only part of who I was. What I learned from my own journey through recovery was that I needed my family and friends for total health. I also tell people—from my own experience—that if you are too busy for family and friends, *you are too busy*, and you might want to reprioritize your life. Without true friendship, you’ll be leading a pretty lonely life. True friendship allows us to journey forward.”

Antidote to Stress

Busy professionals who don’t take time out for stress relief with close friends run a higher risk of burning out.

“Friendships are especially important when we are under stress,” says Alice Brink, a corporate

“True friendship is like sound health; the value of it is seldom known until it is lost.”

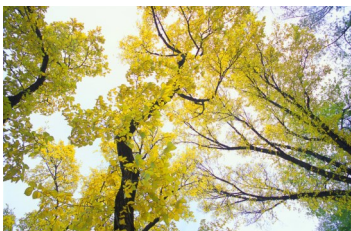
- Charles Caleb Colton

(Continued on page 2)

Keeping Up Friendships is Good for Your Health

No distance of place or lapse of time can lessen the friendship of those who are thoroughly persuaded of each other's worth.

- Robert Southey



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(Continued from page 1)

communications consultant and current board president of the National Alliance on Mental Illness affiliate in Houston. "Yet I think one of our first instincts is to pull back into a protective shell."

"Even when I am stressed and busy, I try to reach out to at least meet a friend for coffee or a weekend dinner," Brink adds. "I see it as a stress reliever."

Constant stress makes it harder to deal with minor setbacks. "Friends can help us logistically during these times," says Bonior. "They're a ready safety net. They can pick up the kids for us, bring us casseroles, and help us out of a jam when we have too much to do. Plus, having friends can increase your pain threshold and make you laugh—both very positive things."

Real Connections Matter

"Social media gives us the illusion of being connected, but are we actually connecting?" Bonior asks. "In reality, social media can be a time suck. We're not getting any

emotional intimacy out of it. Clicking 'like' is not really connecting."

When being together in person isn't possible, some people find the next best thing is Skype or another technology that allows them to see one another while they talk.

"I count my sisters among my closest friends, but they are scattered across the country," Brink notes. "I've been amazed by how much richer our relationships are now that we can talk face-to-face via video calls instead of just emails or voice calls."

Our Need to Share Stories

It's not uncommon to feel we don't have enough friends, says Bonior. "It can be intimidating to make friends as an adult. But as we make life transitions, get married, change jobs, move to a new city or a new job, it's totally normal and natural to make new friendships."

As we seek out new friends or reconnect with old ones, we should look for an easy rapport in which we're comfortable sharing our thoughts and feelings. We need friends who will

listen, and we need to be available to listen to our friends.

"It's been documented that sharing our stories, especially the most difficult ones, is a healing process," says Brink. "But a big part of that process is knowing that we are being heard by someone. That's why spending time with someone in person is such a valuable aspect of friendship."

We can work through difficult periods in our life more easily with the support of a trusted friend.

"So many of our feelings can be made so much easier to manage, and perhaps more fun to experience, just by saying them aloud and letting them build a bridge between us and another person," writes Bonior in *The Friendship Fix*. "Exposing our fears makes them much less frightening; affirming our triumphs makes them much more real; revealing our grief relieves us of carrying the burden completely alone. A compassionate and empathetic friend, much like a therapist, can give us and our emotions a foundation to cling to."

RESOURCES

- *The Friendship Fix: The Complete Guide to Choosing, Losing, and Keeping Up With Your Friends* by Andrea Bonior, Ph.D., St. Martin's Griffin (2011)
- Copeland Center for Wellness And Recovery <http://mentalhealthrecovery.com>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness <http://www.nami.org>
- Mayo Clinic article "Social support: Tap this tool to beat stress" <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/social-support/art-20044445>