



# Social connection for wellbeing

Humans are biologically 'hard wired' to connect with others. Throughout history, we have relied on each other for survival. The human brain has evolved in tandem with humanity's complex social networks. Accordingly, social interactions involve widespread, complex neurological functions. Put simply, your brain is very active when you spend time with other people! This 'social brain network' helps to explain why social connection is so important for our lifelong health and mental wellbeing.

## A key to wellbeing across the lifespan

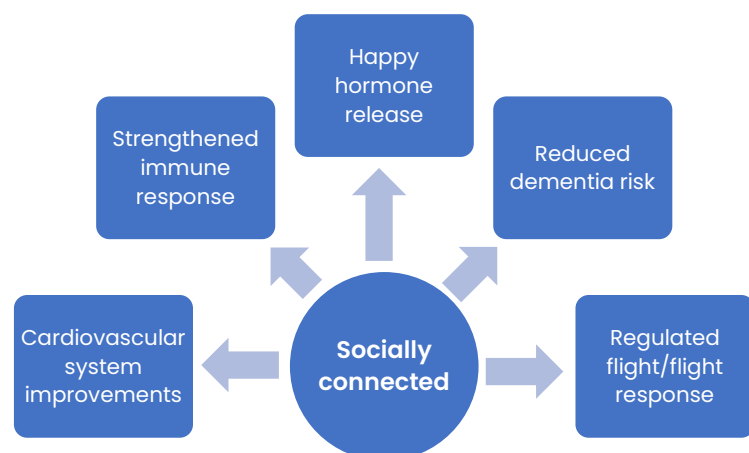
In young people, higher social connectedness at school has been associated with lower risk of depression, suicidality, social anxiety and self-esteem issues (ref [here](#)). Here at the Thompson Institute, our research found that lower social connection is an important predictor of psychological distress in young people and can even alter the trajectory of brain development.

It's not just young people who benefit from connection. The famous Harvard 'Happiness' Study, has been tracking adults since 1938 and aims to discover what makes a happy, healthy life? Unsurprisingly, it's not materialistic possessions but *people* that appear to be the answer. At age 50, participants' satisfaction with their personal relationships was the biggest predictor of their health at 80 – even more important than their cholesterol levels.

## Health benefits

Research shows that when we feel connected to others, we undergo physiological changes that contribute to our health. This includes:

- Improvements in our cardiovascular system
- Strengthened immune responsiveness to stress
- The release of oxytocin, our happy hormone
- Reduced risk of dementia



Social connection may also help your brain to feel safe by toning down the 'fight/flight' response. Research suggests that being around unfamiliar faces is more likely to activate the brain's defence mechanisms. This is because, on a basic level, your brain perceives uncertain environments as a

potential for higher threat. On the other hand, being able to socially identify the faces around you, whether that's in your neighbourhood, workplace or wider community can help with reducing loneliness; increasing wellbeing; giving a sense of togetherness in your community; and feeling safer and calmer.

## How much social connection?

We've ascertained that social connection is good for our health, including mental health. But how much is required? The answer is not clear-cut: it depends on your individual needs.

For some, a lot of human interaction is energising and motivational and can fuel our sense of purpose. For others, while social connection is still valued, it may be found in quieter, more intimate settings where meaningful one-on-one interactions provide a sense of fulfilment and a way to recharge energy.

Neither are right or wrong. The key is finding a level of social connectedness that you feel personally happy with. Our subjective experience of loneliness – or absence thereof – is a good internal guiding pilot to go by.

## Closing thoughts

Social connections play a vital role in our lives and overall wellbeing. If we feel socially connected, we are more resilient and can better 'bounce back' after difficult times.

Whether it's spending time with family, catching up with friends, or engaging in community activities, these interactions can provide us with a sense of belonging and support. Making time for social connections isn't just about having fun; it's an investment in our wellbeing, happiness and resilience.



### Reflection activity

- How connected do you feel?
- Are you feeling connected? Who to?
- Have you got the level of social connection that works well for you?

If yes, fantastic! Keep it up.

If not, what could you do to help you feel more connected?

### Ideas for building social connectedness

**Community connections:** strike up a conversation with your neighbour; walk your dog in your neighbourhood; volunteer at a local centre; check your council or library websites for local events you might enjoy; look for local sport, religious, hobby or cultural groups that might interest you.

Find your local neighbourhood centre:  
[www.anhca.org/](http://www.anhca.org/)

**Strengthen existing relationships:** Make a phone call to someone you care about; arrange a coffee date with an acquaintance; reconnect with people you have lost touch with; book in social time with colleagues.

Boosting your wellbeing now, can help you cope when the unexpected happens. Our events and resources can support you to increase wellbeing using practical, evidence-based strategies.

For more information visit: [usc.edu.au/thompson-institute](http://usc.edu.au/thompson-institute)



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