



THE POWER IN CONNECTION

HOW TO MAKE AND MAINTAIN SOCIAL
CONNECTIONS

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SOCIAL HEALTH

THE FORGOTTEN DIMENSION OF HEALTH

The World Health Organization defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Social health is the overall well-being that comes from connection through relationships and community.

It seems like an easy dimension to check off and feel healthy in. But the fact of the matter is, the United States is in the midst of a loneliness epidemic. In the United States alone, about 50% of people report they do not feel like they have a sense of community and 52% of people report feelings of loneliness. At least 30% of U.S adults reported feeling lonely at least once a week in the past year and at least 30% of adults between the ages of 18-34 feel lonely every day or several times a week.

The difficult thing about loneliness is it can be so subjective. It is hard to define loneliness because everyone experiences it differently. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines loneliness as "feeling like you do not have meaningful or close relationships" or

"feeling like you do not have a sense of belonging." Loneliness is so impactful that some scientists even believe it is a physiological response to a lack of human connection, similar to hunger and thirst when we lack adequate food and water.

When we experience chronic loneliness (feeling lonely and disconnected from the community for an extended period of time) it can lead to an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and other chronic health conditions. It can also lead to an increasingly weakened immune system, resulting in more infections. We do not know exactly why these physiological responses occur, but it is believed to have something to do with the body sending distress signals. These distress signals can lead to chronic inflammation resulting in physical symptoms.

Why does any of this matter? Because you matter! Your well-being matters! There is a lot in this world we cannot control, but we can control the amount and types of connections we have. We can control our social health.

THINK OF IT LIKE DATING

I want you to think of social health like dating. Sometimes dating and courtship can lead to deep, lifelong relationships. Sometimes dating leads to friendships or relationships that change you. Other times we meet people while dating who are enjoyable but do not have the makings of a lifelong relationship. We explore these types of relationships in a tree metaphor at the end of the article. But the point is there are different types of relationships and all are important.

We need different points of connection to grow and thrive. But when it comes to making new connections or deepening current connections, this takes time, intent, and courting.

We all like to feel wanted and connected, so do not be afraid to pursue your friendships. Go out with your friends... have a 'girls' night' or 'bros night' or maybe it's a 'game night', 'hang out sesh'. You get the idea. We need to set aside time getting to know the other person and find ways to connect and deepen our relationship.

When finding a potential new friend, look for places of similarities. This could be similarities in hobbies, values, or life events. Similarities are a great conversation point because it is an area of connection. From there dive deeper, get to know this person's joys and worries, and find ways to serve this person. When we serve people, we not only deepen our feelings for them, we help them feel seen and heard which can help deepen their feelings of connection towards us and help strengthen their wellbeing.

If you need help knowing where to even start with social connection, you are not alone. With the spread of technology and services, we have begun to outsource all of our wants with little need for human interaction. .



For example, in the past when boredom or spare time occurred, we would play games and spend time talking with other people face to face. Now with technology and services in the palm of our hands, we have traded in our game pieces for the latest video game and talking face to face for scrolling social media in search of connection.

When we needed groceries we used to go to the store or farmers market, surrounding ourselves with dozens of other shoppers. We stood in line chatting with the cashier, we smiled at strangers and connected while shopping. Now we keep our heads down and get in and out of the store as fast as we can, using the self-checkout to ensure minimal human interaction, or better yet we sit in our car and let someone else put our groceries in our car for us.

We have even limited our social interactions, when partaking in luxuries. If we want to eat out but not leave the comfort of our couch, no worries there are multiple services for that, thank you Uber Eats and Grubhub. Going out of town and needing a pet sitter? You can bypass asking your neighbor for help, by hopping onto Rover to find a stranger to do it. Between apps, services and drive throughs we have bypassed and limited our social interactions and hindered our ability to get out and interact with others in a way that not only helps our social wellbeing, but also simply reminds us of the humanity all around.

When trying to cure our loneliness we need to find ways to make new connections in natural ways.

A few ways to do this are:

- Start a new hobby or return to an old one. Most hobbies will lead to meeting people with a shared interest. So sign up for a class or go to that concert or poetry slam. Or if that is still outside of your comfort zone, consider joining Corporate Games, and competing in an activity of your choice. Whatever it is try to surround yourself with those who have similar interests.
- Pick a social place to hang out. Gathering places are key to social interactions. Try a park or dog park, or coffee house or join us for one of Healthy Lifestyles walks and hikes. And try it more than once, we know it takes several visits or meetings to feel comfortable. So don't give up hope when you don't meet someone on your first exploration out.
- Lower your connection expectations. Remember micro-connections help us feel more connected too. Try smiling at a stranger, or complimenting a co-worker you do not know well. We don't need deep, everlasting relationships right away, start with the casual and then build for more. Coming to a Healthy Lifestyles Lunch and Learn would be an easy way to make some micro-connections.
- And last but not least remember that practice makes perfect. Anxiety is rooted in avoidance, meaning the more we avoid or try not to do something, the scarier and harder it becomes. If you have ever watched a child on the playground, they often have

no fear of rejection. They often can walk right up and ask someone to be their friend. Anxiety of rejection is often learned from not doing it enough. We need to expose ourselves to the risk of rejection that comes with social interaction to build our social skills.

Work Your Social Muscles

Just like our physical muscles need to be strengthened for physical health so do our social muscles. Kasley Killem in her book, "The Art and Science of Connection", talks about 4 strategies to strengthen our social muscles. The first one is stretching our social muscles by growing our relationships and getting out of our comfort zones. The second way is resting our social muscles. Just like how we need to rest our physical muscles, sometimes we need to take a break from growing new and current relationships and instead focus on mindfulness and connecting with ourselves. The third strategy is toning our social muscles by deepening our current relationships and taking them to the next level. The fourth and last strategy is flexing our social muscles meaning to work towards sustaining our relationships for the long term.

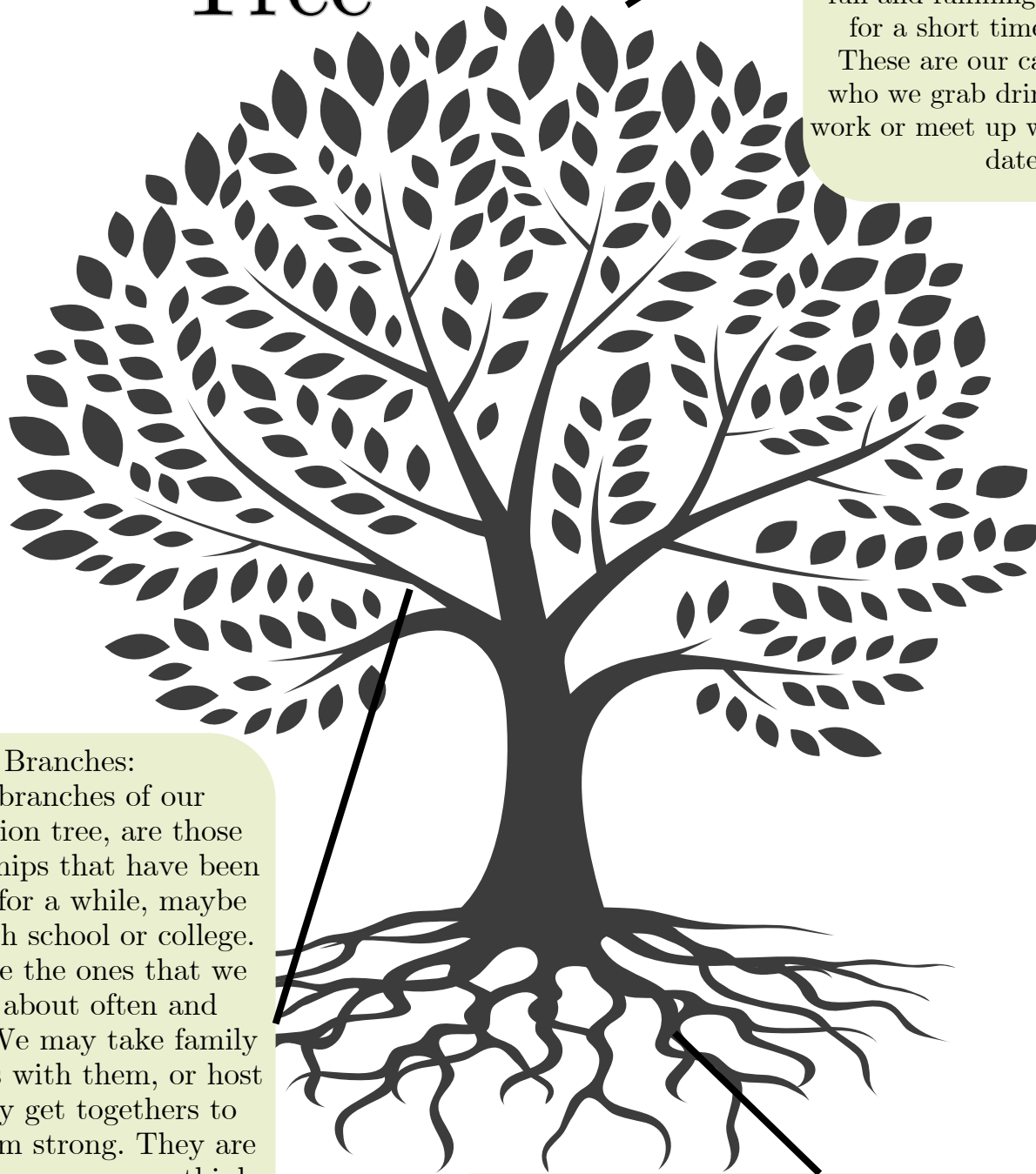
Relationships take time and energy. So find ways to make time for those who are important to you. Plan that girls/bros/game/hang out night. Pick up the phone on your commute and call a friend you haven't talked to in a while. Invite your friend to go to the gym with you. Meal prep with a friend. Go into the grocery store. Work from a coffee shop. There are dozens of ways we can deepen and strengthen the relationships in our lives.

You are not alone.

The last thing I want to remind you of is the statistics from the beginning. 53% of adults in the United States report feeling lonely. You are not alone. So do not hesitate to smile and reach out, chances are the people around you want and are craving the connection too.



The Connection Tree



Leaves:

The leaves of our connection tree represent those friendships and connections that change with the seasons. They are often fun and fulfilling but only last for a short time in our life.

These are our casual friends, who we grab drinks with after work or meet up with on a lunch date.

Branches:

The branches of our connection tree, are those relationships that have been around for a while, maybe since high school or college. They are the ones that we think about often and fondly. We may take family vacations with them, or host monthly get togethers to keep them strong. They are also the ones we may think will be around forever, but a big storm or fight can cause them to break.

Roots:

The roots of our connection tree are reserved for those connections that shape and ground us. These are the relationships that never go anywhere and help form the foundation of who we are. These are your 3am phone call relationships, the first person you think of in an emergency, the haven't talked or seen each other in a year and yet nothing has changed person. They are deep and powerful connections.