

# Hang out at the water cooler, live longer

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Companies like Google and Zappos.com are famous for their "work hard, play hard" attitudes and friendly work environments, but are their employees healthier too? According to a Tel Aviv University researcher, a positive relationship with your co-workers has long-term health benefits.

Dr. Sharon Toker of the Department of Organizational Behavior at TAU's Leon Recanati Graduate School of Business Administration says that employees who believe that they have the personal support of their peers at work are more likely to live a longer life. "We spend most of our waking hours at work, and we don't have much time to meet our friends during the weekdays," explains Dr. Toker. "Work should be a place where people can get necessary emotional support."

Dr. Toker and her TAU colleagues Prof. Arie Shirom and Yasmin Alkaly, along with Orit Jacobson and Ran Balicer from Clalit Healthcare Services, followed the health records of 820 adults who worked an average of 8.8 hours a day through a two-decade period. Those who had reported having low social support at work were 2.4 times more likely to die sometime within those 20 years, says Dr. Toker.

The study has been published in the journal *Health Psychology*.

## Reaching out

820 study participants were drawn from adults aged 25 to 65 who came into their local HMO office for a routine check-up. Researchers

controlled for various psychological, behavioral or physiological risk factors, such as smoking, obesity and depression, and administered a questionnaire to participants, who were drawn from a wide variety of professional fields including finance, health care and manufacturing.

Researchers asked about employees' relationships with their supervisors, and also assessed the subjects' evaluation of their peer relationships at work, and whether their peers were friendly and approachable, a reflection of emotional and professional support. Dr. Toker suspects that the perception of emotional support was the strongest indicator of [future health](#).

During the course of the study, says Dr. Toker, 53 participants died, most of whom had negligible social connections with their co-workers. A lack of emotional support at work led to a 140% increased risk of dying in the next twenty years compared to those who reported supportive co-workers, she concluded.

While building a supportive environment for employees may seem intuitive, Dr. Toker says that many workplaces have lost their way. Despite open concept offices, many people use email rather than face-to-face communication, and social networking sites that may provide significant social connection are often blocked.

How to make an office friendlier to your health? Dr. Toker suggests coffee corners where people can congregate to sit and talk; informal social outings for staff members; an internal virtual social network similar to Facebook; or a peer-assistance program where employees can confidentially discuss stresses and personal problems that may affect their position at work — anything that encourages employees to feel emotionally supported, she says.

Power burdens women, frees men

The study also addressed "control issues" in the workplace, Dr. Toker says. Study participants were asked if they were able to take initiative at work and if they had the freedom to make their own decisions on how tasks should be accomplished. Results indicate that while men flourished when afforded more control over their daily work tasks, women with the same control had a shorter lifespan.. Those women who reported that they had significant control over their tasks and workflow had a 70 percent increased risk of dying over the 20-year period.

In one sense, explains Dr. Toker, power at work is a good thing. "But there is a lot of responsibility on your shoulders," she adds. "If you have to make important decisions with no guidance, it can be stressful." Women in high power positions, she adds, may be overwhelmed with the need to be tough at work, and still be expected to maintain stressful duties when at home.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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