

Social groups alleviate depression

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Building a strong connection to a social group helps clinically depressed patients recover and helps prevent relapse, according to a new study.

For the paper, Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) Senior Fellow Alexander Haslam, lead author Tegan Cruwys and their colleagues at the University of Queensland conducted two studies of patients diagnosed with depression or anxiety. The patients either joined a community group with activities such as sewing, yoga, sports and art, or partook in group therapy at a [psychiatric hospital](#).

In both cases, patients responding to survey questions who did not identify strongly with the [social group](#) had about a 50 percent likelihood of continued depression a month later. But of those who developed a stronger connection to the group and who came to see its members as 'us'

rather than 'them,' less than a third still met the criteria for [clinical depression](#) after that time. Many [patients](#) said the group made them feel supported because everyone was "in it together."

"We were able to find clear evidence that joining groups, and coming to identify with them, can alleviate depression," says Haslam, a member of CIFAR's Social Interactions, Identity & Well-Being (SIIWB) program.

While past research has looked at the importance of social connections for preventing and treating depression, Dr. Haslam says it has tended to emphasize interpersonal relationships rather than the importance of a sense of group identity. In addition, researchers haven't really understood why [group therapy](#) works.

"Our work shows that the 'group' aspect of social interaction is critical," he says.

The researchers say the next questions they will try to answer are what factors encourage people to engage with a group and to internalize its identity, and how this leads them to develop a sense of support, belonging, purpose and meaning. Haslam says this is likely to involve both group and individual factors, including how accommodating the group is, and how the group fits with a person's understanding of themselves and the world.

Haslam says his participation in the SIIWB program has greatly influenced his research on [depression](#) and CIFAR's support has, in many ways, led him down the path toward studies like this one.

"The group is a major source of encouragement, but it has also helped to hone our questions in important ways—so that we have asked the right questions and looked in the right places for answers."

This paper is in press at the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

More information: Feeling connected again: Interventions that increase social identification reduce depression symptoms in community and clinical settings, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2014.

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