

Meaningful relationships can help you thrive

August 29 2014

Deep and meaningful relationships play a vital role in overall well-being. Past research has shown that individuals with supportive and rewarding relationships have better mental health, higher levels of subjective well-being and lower rates of morbidity and mortality. A paper published in *Personality and Social Psychology Review* provides an important perspective on thriving through relationships, emphasizes two types of support that relationships provide, and illuminates aspects where further study is necessary.

What is 'thriving'?

Researchers Brooke Feeney of Carnegie Mellon University and Nancy Collins of University of California at Santa Barbara emphasize the importance of relationships in supporting individuals not only in their ability to cope with stress or adversity, but also in their efforts to learn, grow, explore, achieve goals, cultivate new talents, and find purpose and meaning in life. Relationships can permit a person to thrive, but unfortunately we know relatively little about how relationships promote or hinder thriving.

According to the researchers, thriving involves 5 components of well-being; hedonic well-being (happiness, life satisfaction), eudaimonic well-being (having purpose and meaning in life, progressing toward meaningful life goals), psychological well-being (positive self-regard, absence of [mental health](#) symptoms/disorders), social well-being (deep and meaningful human connections, faith in others and humanity, positive interpersonal expectancies), and physical well-being (healthy

weight and activity levels, health status above expected baselines).

Two types of support

People will be most likely to thrive with well-functioning close relationships that serve different support functions – whether the relationship is with friends, parents, siblings, a spouse, or mentors. The review emphasizes two types of support, both serving unique functions in different life contexts. The first important function of relationships is to support thriving through adversity, not only by buffering individuals from negative effects of stress, but also by enabling them to flourish either because of or in spite of their circumstances. "Relationships serve an important function of not simply helping people return to baseline, but helping them to thrive by exceeding prior baseline levels of functioning," explains lead researcher Brooke Feeney. "We refer to this as source of strength (SOS) support, and emphasize that the promotion of thriving through adversity is the core purpose of this support function."

The second important function of relationships is to support thriving in the absence of adversity by promoting full participation in life opportunities for exploration, growth, and personal achievement. Supportive relationships help people thrive in this context by enabling them to embrace and pursue opportunities that enhance positive well-being, broaden and build resources, and foster a sense of purpose and meaning in life. This type of support is referred to as relational catalyst (RC) support because support providers can serve as active catalysts for thriving in this context. This form of support emphasizes that the promotion of thriving through life opportunities is its core purpose.

Can a support-provider do more harm than good?

The researchers emphasize that there are certain characteristics of support-providers that enhance their capacity to provide meaningful support. "It is not just whether someone provides support, but it is how he or she does it that determines the outcome of that support. Any behaviors in the service of providing SOS and RC support must be enacted both responsively and sensitively to promote thriving," explains Feeney. "Being responsive involves providing the type and amount of support that is dictated by the situation and by the partner's needs, and being sensitive involves responding to needs in such a way that the support-recipient feels understood, validated, and cared for."

Support-providers may inadvertently do more harm than good if they make the person feel weak, needy, or inadequate; induce guilt or indebtedness; make the recipient feel like a burden; minimize or discount the recipient's problem, goal, or accomplishment; blame the recipient for his or her misfortunes or setbacks; or restrict autonomy or self-determination. Support-providers might also be neglectful or disengaged, over-involved, controlling, or otherwise out of sync with the recipient's needs. Responsive support requires the knowledge of how to support others and take their perspective, the resources (i.e., cognitive, emotional, and/or tangible) needed to provide effective support, and the motivation to accept the responsibility to support another.

Support-recipients also play an important role in this process by facilitating or hindering the receipt of responsive support. Support-recipients can cultivate effective support by reaching out to others (vs. withdrawing), expressing needs in a clear and direct manner, being receptive to others' support efforts, regulating demands on others (not taxing their social network), expressing gratitude, engaging in healthy dependence and independence, building a dense relationship network, and providing reciprocal support. The researchers emphasize that accepting support when needed, and being willing and able to provide support in return, should cultivate the types of mutually caring

relationships that enable people to thrive.

Need for Future Research

Much of the existing literature focuses on how relationships can help in times of stress, and most of this work has focused on self-reports of perceived social support. It will be important for future research to (a) do more assessing of actual support behaviors that are enacted in dyadic interaction and of the degree to which those behaviors are responsive to the needs of the recipient, (b) recognize that social support in adverse life circumstances can do much more than buffer against negative effects of the stressor, (c) do more investigating of [social support](#) in non-adverse life circumstances, (d) work toward understanding mediating pathways and mechanisms of action (with a focus on thriving as the ultimate outcome), and (e) focus on close relationships as being central to facilitating or hindering thriving.

The researchers hope that this framework will provide a foundation for the development of [relationship](#)-based interventions aimed at promoting public health. Interventions may focus on building close supportive relationships (e.g., within families or through mentors), and training support-providers to deliver the type of responsive support that fosters growth and thriving.

More information: Feeney, B.C., Collins, N.L. (2014). A New Look at Social Support: A Theoretical Perspective on Thriving Through Relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Citation: Meaningful relationships can help you thrive (2014, August 29) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-08-meaningful-relationships.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.