

Poor social integration = poor health

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

There are many benefits to being supported by a strong social network. But can having more friends actually make you healthier? New research from Concordia shows that social relationships affect not only our

mental but also our physical wellbeing.

In a recent study published in *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, Jean-Philippe Gouin, a Concordia psychology professor, tracked a group of international students who experienced major social change following a move to Montreal. The results showed that those who managed to build a better support network were healthier overall. The proof is in their heart rates.

Over a five-month period, participants responded to questionnaires that measured their social integration, as well as how lonely they felt. Gouin and his Concordia co-authors, Stephanie Fitzpatrick and Biru Zhou, also monitored participants' heart rates to detect changes in what's known as high-frequency [heart rate](#) variability (HF-HRV).

Why the interest in heart rate fluctuations? Because it's a marker of how well your parasympathetic nervous system is functioning. "Other research has shown that individuals with a lower heart [rate variability](#) are at increased risk for the development of poor health, including greater risk for cardiac diseases. Therefore, decreases in heart rate variability are bad for you," Gouin says.

The study showed that immigrants who were able to form friendships and get involved in new social networks during their first five months in Canada had increases in [heart rate variability](#), while those who remained socially isolated over time showed a decrease.

"In the weeks and months that follow a major move, people often find it hard to make new friends and establish a solid social network," says Gouin, who holds a Canada Research Chair in Chronic Stress and Health. "This study shows that such prolonged social isolation can have a negative effect on physical health by impacting our parasympathetic functioning. That applies not just to [international students](#) but to anyone

moving to a new country or city or anyone experiencing major social changes."

What can new immigrants do to keep their HF-HRV functioning at high levels so that their autonomic nervous systems keep up the good work?

"The message is clear: Reach out to other people. The more quickly you manage to integrate socially in your new home, the healthier you'll be.

It's easier said than done, but it's worth it," Gouin says.

Provided by Concordia University

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