

Having a social group will improve your health

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Social connectedness supports our physical and mental health. Credit: Matheus Ferrero on Unsplash

It's well established that people who feel socially isolated, or as though they don't belong, have worse mental health than those who feel socially connected. But in a study recently published in the [Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry](#), we've shown that increasing your level of social connection can protect your future mental health.

Previous research has found "[social connectedness](#)" is at least as [good for your health](#) as quitting smoking or exercise. It aids recovery from physical and mental illness, and provides resilience for [stressful life events](#) and transitions. So what is social connectedness, and how can we get more of it?

What is social connectedness?

Social connectedness isn't about being popular, or having a lot of friends. Although it can come from the personal relationships you have with other individuals, [research finds](#) it's belonging to groups that's most important for your health.

When we feel we truly belong to a group – like being part of "the Marsh family" or "us Stanley Street residents" – we benefit from both the bonds we share with other [group members](#), and how belonging to that group tells us something about who we are.

Social connectedness is crucial to physical and mental health. A 2010 [review of 148 studies](#) found that [people](#) who felt less socially connected had more risk of early death than those who smoked, drank or were obese.

Therapeutic programs that focus on [building social connectedness](#) are effective in treating depression, anxiety and schizophrenia. But improving someone's social connectedness can also support and protect the health of people in their everyday lives.

For example, people who make new social group connections are [less likely to develop](#) depression. And people who maintain and build their social group connections have greater well-being during the transition to [retirement](#) or [university](#).

Social connectedness has also been positively associated with mental health in large, population-based studies of [Australian](#), [British](#) and [American](#) adults.

What our study means

Our [latest study](#) investigated the link between social connectedness and mental health in 25,000 New Zealand adults over four years using the longitudinal [New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study \(NZAVS\)](#). We asked people about their personal feelings of belonging with others in their community and found when a person's level of [social connection](#) goes down, they experience worse mental health a year later.

The relationship also went the other way: people with good mental health were more socially connected a year later. But, importantly, the influence of social connectedness on [mental health](#) over time was about three times stronger than the other way around.

Despite all this knowledge, there's been little change in health care, public policy, or individual behaviour. Government [health departments](#) specifically [recommend healthy eating](#), exercise and quitting smoking to improve health, yet tend to omit any mention of social connection. One reason might be that it's unclear how social connection works to promote health, compared to other factors like smoking.

The best way to understand this measure is to see it as a psychological resource. Just like money in the bank means you can absorb financial shocks, a broad network of social group memberships means you can better navigate the physical and mental stresses of life.

Social connectedness can act as a resource by providing a sense of [shared meaning](#) and purpose. Weeding a community garden each Saturday is about more than earning your share of zucchinis, for

instance. It's also about recognising the garden cannot flourish without the efforts of many people, and taking part in something larger than yourself.

Having an important role to play in the garden's success means that the group's purpose becomes your purpose. Another way being socially connected is like a resource as it provides access to [material and emotional support](#) which helps during stressful events and difficult life transitions. If one member of a church group is in grief, others may step in to provide food, or help the grieving member speak about their feelings.

Such expression of other group members' commitment reinforces the feelings of belonging and security that the grieving person finds in their church group.

How to improve your social connectedness

How can we harness the power of social connection to improve our health and the [health](#) of our communities? Remember that social connectedness is more than mere contact with other people, or even merely being a member of social groups. It is about feeling that you belong to that group; that you trust others and they trust you in a shared purpose, and that group members can rely on each other.

At a personal level, you could take stock of your existing relationships and group memberships, and make a change if these relationships are not trusting, mutually supportive, or have a shared meaning and purpose.

At a community level, you could join or lead initiatives that will build trust and psychological bonds between community members. Local fetes and festivals are popular, but one-off events are not by [themselves sufficient](#) to promote social connectedness. But these events could be a

starting point for community members to discover and join ongoing, supportive social groups with their own shared purposes.

This might include finding a shared purpose for existing [social groups](#), such as the ["men's sheds" movement](#), which sets up places for men to come together and work on meaningful projects in the company of other men. Or it could include joining new groups like the [popular parkrun](#) held weekly in public parks across Australia, which brings together the dual benefits of social connection and exercise.

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