

To thrive, get a balanced diet of social nutrition

December 9 2019, by Rick Hellman

People might survive by eating just one type of food, but they will hardly thrive. Similarly, a new study co-written by a University of Kansas researcher suggests that humans need a balanced diet of social nutrition, including time alone, to thrive.

Jeffrey Hall, professor of communication studies, drew from over 10,000 moments from the days of nearly 400 participants across the country to connect several pathways linking global well-being to daily patterns of [social interaction](#).

In a forthcoming edition of the journal *Human Communication Research*, the paper extends Hall's Communicate Bond Belong (CBB) theory, the focus of his recent work.

Supporting prior research, Hall found that less loneliness was associated with more frequent interactions with close friends and family, and more social interactions throughout the day were associated with well-being and life satisfaction in general.

Yet, Hall said, "it's not that we have to rearrange our entire lives so we sit and commune with the closest people around us all day long. The results support the idea that we need a couple of high-quality interactions in a day, which can range from serious discussions to catching up and joking around."

The study also found contentment while being alone is an important part

of a balanced social diet.

"You need to be quiet, meditate, nap, chill, whatever you do," Hall said. "It's alone time, but it's about having a balanced system. It's not just that more social time is always better. It's about ratios. It's about proportionality."

The idea for the project came about when Hall and his co-author, Andy Merolla, associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of California-Santa Barbara, talked about their mutual interest in day-to-day patterns of interpersonal communication and well-being. The metaphor of a "social biome" grew out of those conversations as a way to conceptualize the patterns of everyday communication—with all types of people—that best support well-being.

Originally, a biome typically referred to a geographic area whose animals and plants are specially adapted to that environment. Recently, scientists have extended the metaphor to the human body and its microscopic flora and fauna.

"Your social biome can be thought of as homeostatic social system," Hall said. "Some interactions are required, like ones you have to do for your job, and some are habitual or routine. But some are intentional, personal and meaningful in ways that strongly link us to one another. We're working to identify the patterns of interactions that reflect a well-functioning social system."

Hall said this project bolsters his CBB theory, "which is based on a couple [fundamental principles](#), one of which is that we are motivated to interact because we need to secure meaningful relationships. And second, we can't interact all the time because we have limited amount of energy."

He contends that people try to get their needs met with as little expenditure of emotional energy as possible. Those who find balance between connection and energy expenditure have more positive and less negative emotional states in general.

"Essentially," Hall said, "the only way that we can get our fundamental need to belong met is if we have relationships. But we cannot have relationships unless we nourish them through [communication](#). CBB theory says that because we're trying to conserve our energy, the best interactions are the ones where we gain beneficial relational connection without having to expend high amounts of energy in the process.

"Every day we have interactions with people that are exhausting," Hall said. "And we have interactions with people we aren't very close to. This argument says that we want closeness without feeling exhausted. Research on friendship has always said that one of the main characteristics of a close friendship comes from a sense of ease. It's easy to be around them. It's easier to be yourself around them. You don't have to put on a face. You don't have to worry that they will misinterpret what you're saying. You know that they have your best interests at heart."

Rather than trying to make every conversation meaningful or spending more time socializing beyond what we need, a healthier social biome is about balance and proportionality.

Provided by University of Kansas

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