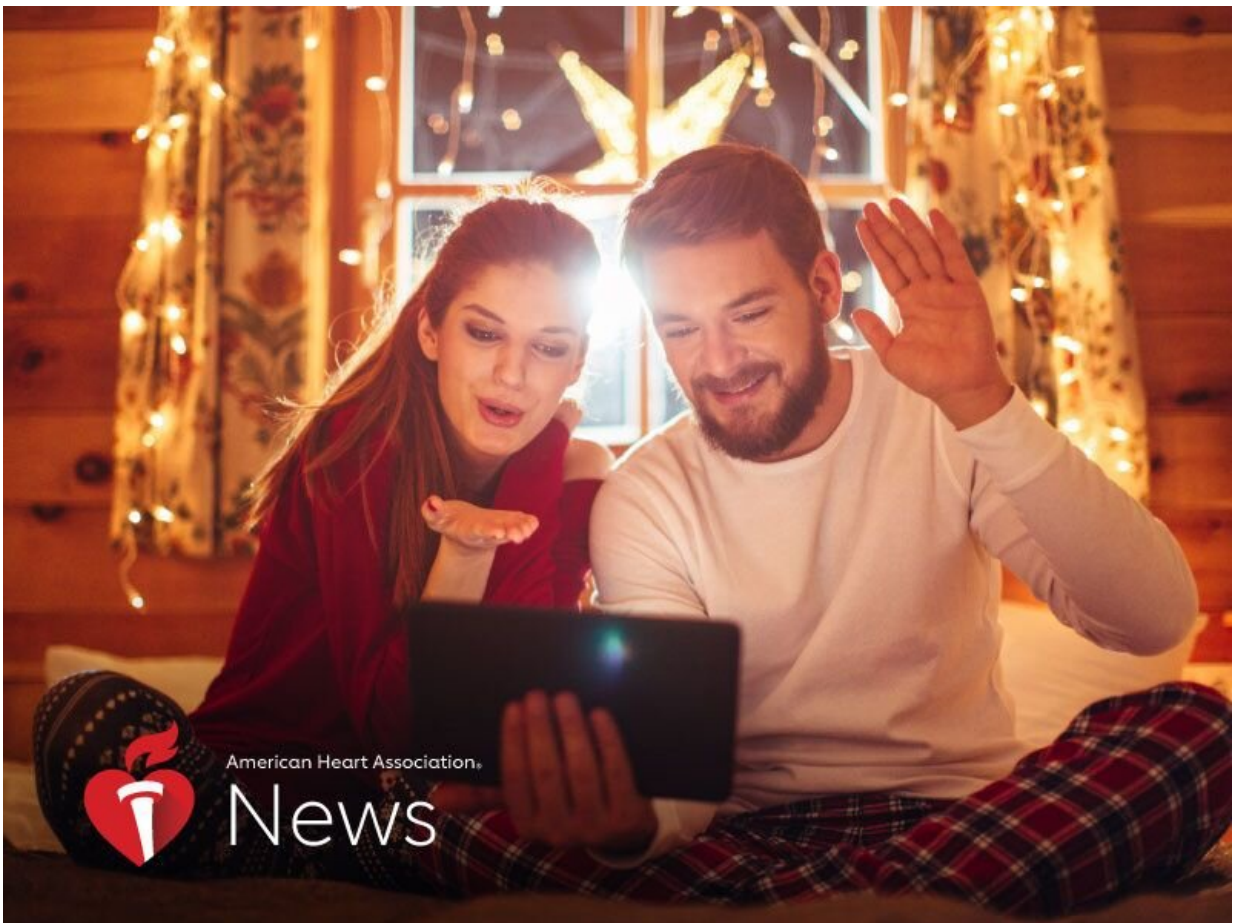


Despite the pandemic, keep social connections strong this holiday season

November 12 2020, by Michael Precker



As the pandemic crashes into the holidays, fewer of us may be getting

together with family and friends to celebrate the season. But the bonds of friendship remain key to emotional—and physical—health.

"People already recognized that lifestyle factors like exercise and diet and sleep influence our health," said Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. "Now that we're in a pandemic and we have to limit [social contact](#), we're realizing how important our relationships are.

"The belief may be that it's primarily associated with emotional well-being, but there is robust evidence it's associated with our physical well-being as well."

The science, experts say, is clear. In 2010, Holt-Lunstad led an analysis published in the journal *PLOS Medicine* of 148 studies involving more than 300,000 people. It indicated that loneliness and poor social relationships were as much a mortality risk factor as smoking, and even more than obesity.

Research has linked longer lifespans to [married people](#) who describe their marriage as happy. A Harvard study of men that began in 1938 and continues today found that positive social relationships at midlife were a better predictor than cholesterol levels of being healthy 30 years later.

"It stands to reason that you might be happier if you had connections with people," said Dr. Robert Waldinger, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School who currently heads the 82-year study.

"We know the mind and body are connected. The big surprise was the idea that if you want to take care of yourself physically and live longer, make the effort to stay connected to people. And studies of other populations around the world have found the same thing," he said.

In this year of quarantines, isolation and less travel, sustaining connections are even more important. As the year culminates in the holiday season, nurturing the bonds of friends and family adds to the challenge.

"People are already doing creative things to maintain relationships like cocktail hours and dinners on Zoom," Waldinger said. "We should be even more proactive about reaching out to people who you're pretty sure are lonely, because they may not be able to do that for themselves."

That's good for everyone involved, Holt-Lunstad said.

"When we reach out to others, even just a text or a call, we can be a source of support," she said. "This can strengthen social bonds and reduce loneliness for them, but it also supports you by giving a sense of meaning and purpose in life."

Even with the best of intentions, Holt-Lunstad said, people need to be sensitive to what their friends really need.

"Research has shown that the more responsive you are to your friend's or partner's needs, builds and strengthens the relationships," she said. "Maybe you just need someone to listen to you, and (instead) they bring you a lasagna."

Especially at this time of year, focusing on gratitude can boost social bonds and decrease feelings of loneliness, she said. "Even from a distance, reaching out and expressing how grateful you are to have someone in your life is something people can do that might help."

To ease the combined stress of holidays and the pandemic, Waldinger recommends focusing inward as well.

"We need cut people we live with a lot of slack," he said. "My spouse and I never signed up for a relationship where we're together 24/7 for months on end. It's like we are marooned on these little ships. It's natural to need more space without thinking there's a problem there."

He's also keen on seeking sources of comfort, be it walking in nature or periodically unplugging from the "stressful swirl of news."

"There's a great saying from a meditation teacher that I like," Waldinger said. "Your mind is like tofu—it tastes like whatever you marinate it in."

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