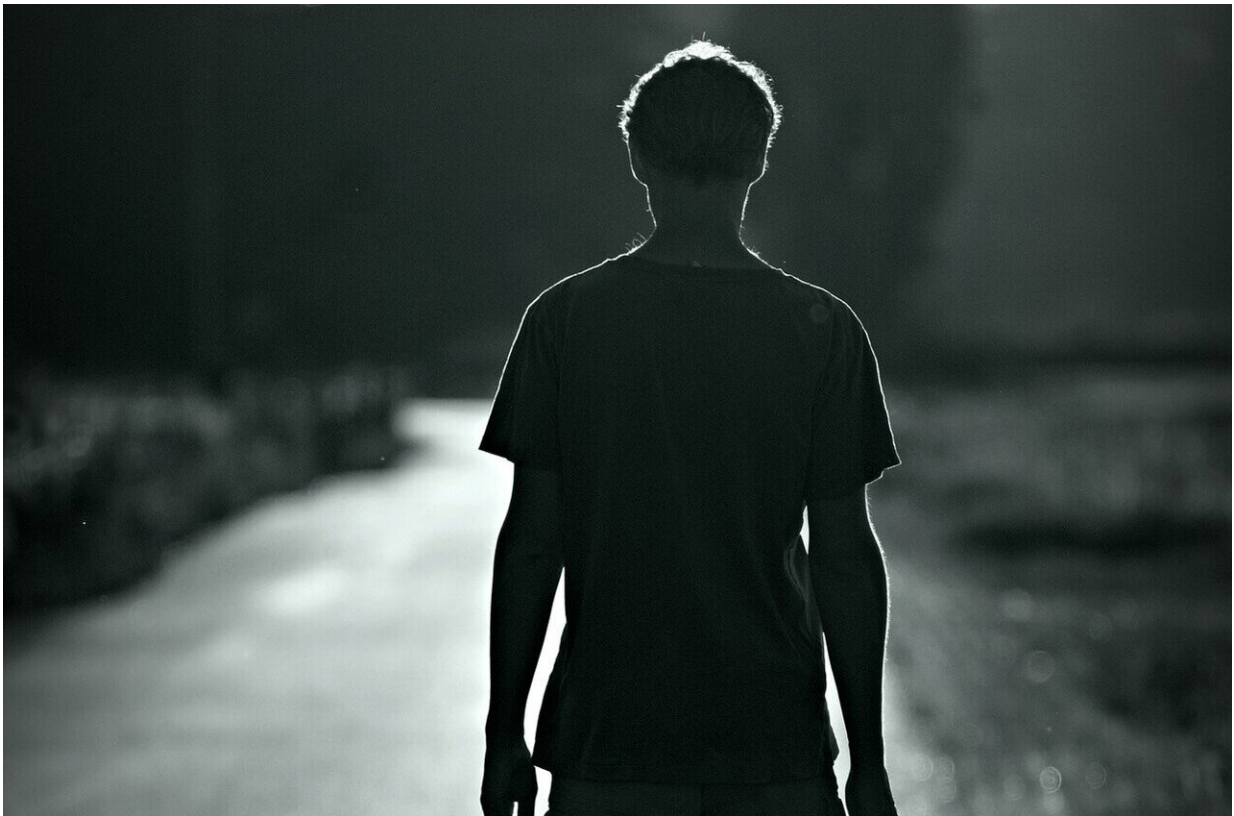


Social connection, social support and physical exercise key to overcoming adversity

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David Creswell and his daughter recently bought ice skates, and on a good week, they hit the ice every couple of days.

The new winter tradition is more than just fun, said Creswell, professor of psychology and neuroscience at Carnegie Mellon University's Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The activity combines exercise and [social interaction](#)—two evidence-based strategies that can help reduce stress and foster good mental health during the pandemic winter.

"The science has shown that [social connection](#), [social support](#) and [physical exercise](#) are key elements to a good life when you're dealing with adversity," said Creswell, a world leader in the emerging science behind what makes people resilient in the midst of stressful and life-altering situations.

When people do both together safely through social sports, they receive a combined benefit from the social connection and the exercise that can have lasting impacts, said Creswell, who's also principal investigator at CMU's Health and Human Performance Lab. A [2018 study](#) in Copenhagen, Denmark, actually found that exercising through social sports, like tennis or badminton, added years to a person's life in comparison to solo workouts, such as running or swimming.

Creswell acknowledges that the pandemic and wintertime pack a one-two punch—people in prolonged quarantine can adopt a learned helplessness. What's more, the winter months can make it more difficult for people to visit safely with others or exercise outside.

To break out of this rut, Creswell recommends a few simple strategies. First, try to be creative when finding new ways to exercise, and second, to actively work on fostering social connections, try calling someone daily or writing gratitude letters.

"You could almost think about this week: Who are the seven people I might call? Reach out to those folks and say, 'I'm calling just to say 'hi.'"

We haven't talked in a while, and you mean a lot to me,'" Creswell said. "Another approach would be to write a thank you note to someone who you feel like you haven't properly thanked in your life. These are powerful evidence-based strategies for resilience."

Engaging in mindfulness meditation also can help people work through loneliness and other difficult feelings, Creswell said. It offers a way to relax and become more open to the challenges before us, and smartphone-based apps can help newcomers practice meditation at home.

Creswell said these strategies can change how the [brain processes](#) stressful experiences and train it to respond to stress more effectively. His research has found that these interventions engage the brain's prefrontal cortex, which is used for planning and emotion regulation. They also can dampen the brain's alarm system, including the amygdala, which activates the fight or flight response.

Creswell's colleague, Janine M. Dutcher, research scientist and lab director at the Health and Human Performance Lab at CMU, said that elements of behavioral activation therapy, a depression treatment, also can be applied to our current context. The therapy encourages people to commit to doing rewarding activities—like going for a run or calling a friend—which can be a difficult step for those suffering from depression.

"Once the individual is engaging in that rewarding activity, it feels good and that starts to combat their feelings of depression. Both the neurobiological evidence and the clinical evidence suggests that these rewarding behaviors can have a powerful effect on reducing stress. Research has shown that, by activating the brain's reward system, you inhibit activation of the brain's regions that control the stress response," Dutcher said. "There might be this sort of seesaw effect that the more

that people are engaging in rewarding behaviors, the more that their stress and anxiety is dampened."

Lastly, Dutcher said that shared experiences can help us connect with friends and loved ones when we can't see them in person. Even largescale pop culture trends, like making sourdough bread or watching the popular Netflix documentary "Tiger King," helped society come together at the pandemic's outset.

"I believe that shared experience was a significant reason that people got through those first stressful and terrifying months a little easier," Dutcher said. "Perhaps there are ways that we can engage in that connection again now."

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University

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