

The pandemic made it hard to stay connected: Here's how to reestablish healthy relationships

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The holidays are a time to share home-cooked meals, reconnect with far-away loved ones and contemplate what the next year has in store.

But for nearly two years, the coronavirus pandemic has affected our ability to safely get together in person. With vaccines now widely available in the U.S. for everyone ages 5 and up—and with [federal health officials](#) encouraging everyone 16 and older to get a booster—more and more families and friends are beginning to reach out.

It may seem challenging after so many months of distancing to reestablish relationships with family and friends—and even co-workers as offices reopen. But experts say it's important for your mental and physical [health](#).

"It's been a while since people have been together, and they may have forgotten about the necessary give-and-take that's a part of navigating social relationships," said Laura Kubzansky, the Lee Kum Kee professor of social and behavioral sciences at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston.

Kubzansky co-authored an American Heart Association scientific statement about the links between psychological well-being and cardiovascular health. Published in January in *Circulation*, it reported on a substantial body of research that found feelings of optimism, happiness and purpose were associated with better heart health and fewer adverse cardiovascular events. Conversely, [social isolation](#) and loneliness may contribute to the development of cardiovascular disease.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been labeled the "pandemic of loneliness." Even before the lockdowns, research showed lonely people tend to be more physically sedentary and are more likely to smoke and have high blood pressure, all risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

Being socially connected might make those things less likely, Kubzansky said. "There are a lot of different pathways that tie better [social relationships](#) to better health," from changes in a person's behavior to mitigating biological responses to stress, she said. "No single mechanism will explain all of the effect. There's just something about feeling cared for that matters in all kinds of ways."

People with better social support also tend to have better psychological health, according to the AHA report. And that social support can come in many forms, said Anne Moyer, professor of social and health psychology at Stony Brook University in New York. Friends and family can provide emotional support when you're going through a hard time, advice and information for handling a problem, and tangible assistance with whatever the situation might be.

"I always say that if you have someone that will help you move, you know that you have tangible support," Moyer said. "Simply knowing that you have people that care about you can lead to an increased sense of connection, self-esteem and control."

Social connections can also encourage and reinforce healthy behaviors and attitudes. Friends and family can remind you to get a health screening or invite you on a walk.

So as you reconnect this holiday season, here are some tips.

Go easy on yourself—and others

Social skills are like any other skills, and we can fall out of practice. You may be rusty after living through the pandemic, Moyer said, and your acquaintances might feel the same.

If your friends or family seem reluctant or awkward when it comes to

socializing, try not to judge them—and don't take their hesitation personally. "It's not necessarily about you or the relationship," Moyer said. Perhaps they experienced a loss or illness themselves or found that lockdowns actually reduced their pandemic-related anxiety and they don't want to lose the sense of security, she said.

One way to gage others' comfort levels might be to propose a lower-risk scenario, such as a brief gathering with masks. "Allow them to take the lead in suggesting potentially more risky scenarios, such as inviting others," Moyer said.

Reconnect safely

The best way to minimize COVID-19 risk for yourself and your friends and family is to get vaccinated. Other protective practices recommended by the CDC include wearing masks indoors in public, avoiding crowded spaces with poor ventilation, and not attending a gathering if you have symptoms.

Fight the inertia

"Relationships take time and effort," Kubzansky said. During the height of the pandemic, many of the little opportunities we usually have to foster connections, such as grabbing coffee with a co-worker, weren't possible. Maintaining relationships took a lot more energy, she said.

She suggests fighting inertia by setting aside one time a week to check in with someone you haven't talked to in a while. "In these times, it really requires commitment," she said.

Start small

Before the holiday party, plan a small get-together to ease back into things, such as a casual lunch with a few friends. A lower-stakes event will take the pressure off everyone, Moyer said. The quick meetup might even turn into a longer conversation.

Help others

Lending a hand can be as beneficial for your own health as receiving support, Kubzansky said. For example, a 2017 study in the journal *BMC Public Health* found that helping others through volunteer work was correlated with better mental and physical health, life satisfaction and social well-being. A 2007 study in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* looked at psychological well-being and found participants who were the least socially connected benefited the most from volunteering in their community.

Even a small gesture, such as holding the door open for someone or bringing a neighbor's trash can back from the curb, can help you feel like a part of a community and make it easier to forge relationships.

Kubzansky's last bit of advice is to stick with it. Reconnecting might not be easy at first, she said, but she knows from firsthand experience with her colleagues that those who made the effort "have so appreciated doing it."

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