

# Q&A: How a social connection expert stays connected and why

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Once a week, social connectedness expert Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad takes an afternoon to ski with her husband, Nathan. During the pandemic, the Salt Lake City couple started hiking together regularly.

And after 30 years of marriage, they still set aside time to go out on dates.

It's not just the secret to a good marriage, said Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience in the department of psychology at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

It might help them live longer.

"There is strong scientific evidence that it's really beneficial to your health to have good relationships in your life," she said.

Holt-Lunstad talks about what research has shown and explains how to maintain strong connections with family and friends in "The Experts Say," an American Heart Association News series in which specialists discuss how they apply what they've learned to their own lives. The following interview with her has been edited.

## **How are good relationships linked to good health?**

Studies show people who are more socially connected can live longer. They are at reduced risk for earlier death from all causes, including [cardiovascular disease](#). Other research shows having poor social relationships is associated with a 29% increased risk for coronary heart disease and a 32% increased risk for stroke. There is also a growing body of research that suggests [social isolation](#) may increase inflammation, raise blood pressure, increase stress and make it harder to get good sleep and stay physically active. All of this may contribute to cardiovascular disease.

To put it in context, lacking social connections may be on par with other well-known cardiovascular risk factors, including smoking cigarettes and drinking too much alcohol, and may exceed the risk from having high

[blood pressure](#), obesity and not being physically active.

## **How does marriage affect heart health?**

People who are married can have better health and live longer. Research shows they are less likely than people who are single or divorced to have cardiovascular disease and less likely to die from heart attacks. But not all relationships or marriages are positive. People who have happy marriages are more likely to live longer.

My husband and I make time to work on our relationship. We're fortunate to be able to go on vacations together, which is especially hard when you have kids. Our kids are 17 and 20, so it's a lot easier now to do that.

## **Aside from romantic relationships, how do you forge other social connections?**

If we don't have relationships in our lives, or if we've lost them, making new ones can sometimes be tricky.

Joining a group is one way, whether it's a civic or faith-based group or one built around hobbies or interests in leisure time activities. Groups can provide a sense of belonging. They can help you develop new relationships and provide a sense of purpose and meaning. Group members can look out for each other and pitch in when someone needs help with a health or other difficult issue, even if it's just emotional support.

Not only is it great to have people to rely on, but being someone that others can rely on can be beneficial. It's better to give than to receive.

I did a study in which we asked people to perform small acts of kindness for their neighbors over a four-week period. People who did this reported reduced levels of loneliness. It's something that's really simple that anyone can do. Sometimes people feel vulnerable reaching out to others to invite them to do something, because they worry they might say no. But helping someone else can be that first step toward making a connection.

## **How have you maintained the social connections in your life?**

I'm married, and I have two sons. I'm also a sister and a friend and a mentor to students and a co-worker.

I'm always conscious of not just studying about and writing about relationships, but of remembering that I need to focus on and make time for my own relationships. I am very conscious about doing the things that all the evidence says are good to do.

Here are some examples:

- Be spontaneous. When I think of a friend, I reach out to them and say hi. I'll sometimes see something that makes me think of someone in my life, and I'll make a point of letting them know that. I try to reach out to friends and [family members](#) in these small little ways.
- Set up traditions and routines. It's important to have a regular cadence to our interactions. One group of friends, we get together every month at the same time. We plan on this. With other friends, I might have a birthday tradition or a holiday tradition that we always follow. Even though getting together may be sporadic in between those interactions, we can always

count on seeing each other for these traditions. And if you have to travel far to see someone, if you don't plan it, the time can fly by and then it's been five years since you've seen them.

- Social media is not enough. Social media may make it easier to keep in touch with friends or facilitate getting together, but it shouldn't be thought of as a replacement for seeing people in person. During the pandemic, especially during lockdown, we spent a lot of time interacting this way. And while it was great to get on [video chat](#) with other people, it just wasn't the same. We wanted to be with other people. It felt like a poor substitute.
- Stay close to family. I'm one of six kids. With my siblings who are local, we get together monthly for dinner. For my entire sibling group, we all get together once a year. We might see each other more than that, but we always know for sure this will happen.

Provided by American Heart Association

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