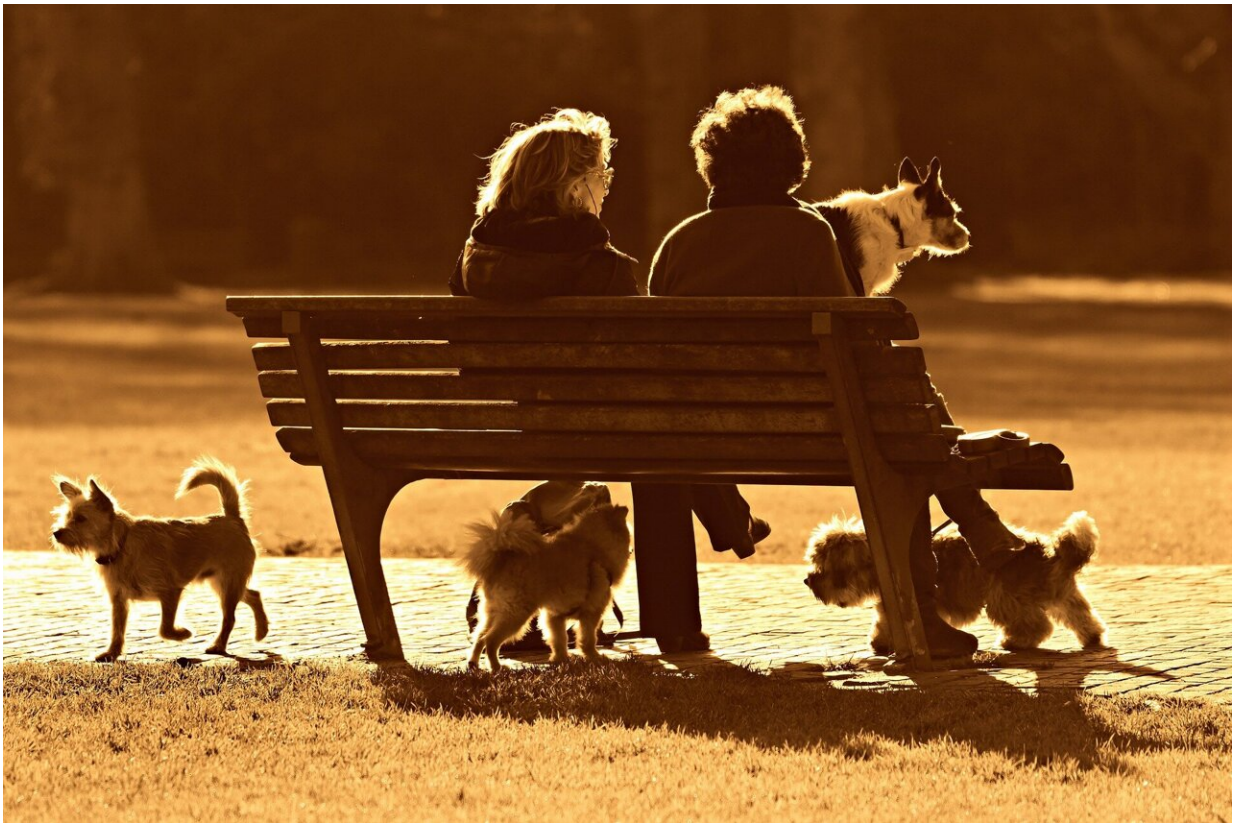


Talking with a friend can ease the sting of being left out

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Small, simple forms of social connection—such as a conversation with a friend, or even just looking forward to one—can lessen the negative feelings and thoughts that come with being socially excluded, according

to a new study by Cornell researchers.

"Maybe someone doesn't smile at you, or maybe somebody doesn't include you in an email chain. We were interested in how interventions involving friends and strangers before the experience might buffer and help people react less strongly to minor but common forms of social exclusion, and promote recovery afterward so they get back to how they typically feel," said first author Randy T. Lee, a doctoral candidate in the field of social and personality psychology who focuses on social belonging and exclusion.

"This work really stresses the importance of having [close relationships](#) around you, people you can count on, and seemingly minor day-to-day interactions that can have meaningful consequences."

Talking with a friend face-to-face before or after being excluded in a [social situation](#) reduced the effect. And even just a reminder of an upcoming interaction with a friend sped up recovery and made study participants feel more secure, the researchers found.

Lee is corresponding author of "Mitigating the Affective and Cognitive Consequences of Social Exclusion," [published](#) in *BMC Public Health*. Lee's co-authors are Gizem Surenkok, Ph.D., and Vivian Zayas, professor of psychology in the Cornell University College of Arts and Sciences.

"The work is showing the benefit of getting outside of our comfort zone. We may sometimes gravitate towards checking our phones or trying to get a bit more work done, but having conversations with our good friends, with peers, classmates or colleagues is not hugely risky, but the benefits can be impactful." Zayas said.

The researchers led 664 study participants to feel disconnection by

playing a virtual ball-tossing game where they were either included or left out, which led to them to experience a lower mood and self-esteem. But some participants experienced a social disconnection intervention: interacting with a friend or an unknown peer before playing the game.

The interventions varied whether a friend was present (versus an unknown peer or being alone), the nature of interpersonal engagement (having a face-to-face conversation versus a reminder of an upcoming interaction or simply having someone nearby), and the timing of the intervention in relation to the game (before versus during and after). After playing the game, participants rated their mood, feelings of belonging, sense of control and social comfort.

"We experience these momentary vulnerabilities, these momentary incidents of disconnection where you're thinking, 'Did that person just slight me?'" said Lee, a graduate resident fellow at Carl Becker House. "But then very quickly, we can recover through these small interactions with a friend. We also find that these small interactions with a friend before that momentary slight can buffer against the [negative consequences](#)."

There was less conclusive evidence that a face-to-face conversation with an unknown peer, or the mere presence of a friend or an unknown peer, buffered or promoted recovery from the sting of social exclusion.

The findings could have implications for organizations from schools to colleges, and medical and occupational institutions.

"Implementing frequent, positive and structured interactions in these settings may effectively promote social connection and reduce individuals' vulnerability to social slights," the team wrote in the paper.

That can have implications for staving off a downward spiral of negative

thinking and withdrawal, with potential impacts on loneliness and isolation, Zayas said.

"What we're trying to do is just take away the edge," she said. "If our emotions aren't as negative, we think better, we reason better, we can see things in a different way, our behaviors are more flexible, and we can be more optimistic."

More information: Randy T. Lee et al, Mitigating the affective and cognitive consequences of social exclusion: an integrative data analysis of seven social disconnection interventions, *BMC Public Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-024-18365-5](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18365-5)

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