



Adventist
Health Ministries
GENERAL CONFERENCE



Seventh-day
Adventist Church

LET'S CELEBRATE **SOCIAL SUPPORT**

S is for the social side of our health.



CELEBRATIONS
LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST



Supporting one another helps with stress.

Julia Neuberger, a rabbi at South London Liberal Synagogue and one of the first two female rabbis in the United Kingdom, was also chair of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering (2006-2008) and was the prime minister's Champion for Volunteering (2007-2009).

Communicating well with others is a vital part of her work and ministry. In the January 1, 2010, issue of The Guardian, however, she wrote, "One change I'd like to see in the coming year is a move away from social networking sites.

The rise of Facebook, LinkedIn et al. has been an important cultural shift of the last decade, with many of us now using the web to make 'friends' and meet possible partners. There is nothing wrong with that in principle, provided they realize that the internet, however much it has transformed our lives for the better, is no substitute for meeting people, getting out there and making friends. Those sites can only make initial connections; they cannot begin to develop the depth of real friendships, of real connectedness."¹

Social support is a vital factor in the health of individuals and society. As psychologist Abraham Maslow observed, love is as essential to the growth of a human being as is food.² Psychologists L. F. Berkman and T. Glass stated that social support affects a person's health:³



- Our friends may have a positive or negative influence on us. Supportive friends build self-esteem and self-efficacy.
- A lack of friends or friends who themselves have unhealthful habits may lead us to seek comfort in unhealthful activities such as smoking, drinking and overeating.
- Support from friends strengthens our coping abilities and reduces our stress.
- Criticism and negative attitudes affect our health, possibly through their influence on the immune or cardiovascular system.

SUPPORT OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

According to E. Stice, J. Ragan, and P. Randall, family support is the most important factor in the lives of adolescents. Many have experienced the support of family and friends as a commitment on their part to love, nurture, and help them. Adolescents have high expectations of parents, and inadequate parental support increases the risk of adolescent depression. They become disappointed and confused when the anticipated help and positive reinforcement from parents are missing. The support of friends is also very important for adolescents.⁵





SUPPORT IN THE SCHOOL

School occupies a considerable amount of time in a youngster's life, so it's not surprising that the experience of young people in school will play an enormous role in their development. Such influence is probably second only to that of the home.

Psychologists V. Battistich and A. Horn studied an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample of 1,434 fifth-and sixth-grade students from 24 elementary schools throughout the United States.⁶ They found that students in supportive settings enjoyed school more, were more academically motivated, and were far less involved in disruptive and delinquent behaviors and drug use. If students sensed "community"—opportunities to engage with others in school and other social groups, and participate in community activities—they flourished. It's important that our youth do more than merely survive adolescence, but blossom into wholesome adults.

SOCIAL SUPPORT AND THE RECOVERY OF DISEASE

A study that is part of an eight-year investigative partnership between Vanderbilt University Medical Center and the Shanghai Institute of Preventive Medicine, beginning in 2002, was published in the Journal of Clinical Oncology. Meira Epplein et al. found that among 2,230 breast cancer survivors, women who scored highest on the social well-being quality-of-life scale had a 48% reduction in their risk for dying from cancer or having a cancer recurrence. Specifically, the women reporting the highest satisfaction with their marriage and family had a 43% risk reduction, and those with favorable interpersonal relationships had a 35% risk reduction.⁴



The social side of our health.

There is plenty of research to convince us that surrounding ourselves with people who genuinely care about us can have a positive effect on our mental well-being. A strong social support network can be critical in helping us through the stress of tough times, whether we've had a bad day at work or a year filled with loss or chronic illness. Supportive family, friends, and coworkers are a very important part of our lives.

CARDIAC ARRHYTHMIA SUPPRESSION TRIAL

Social support definitely benefits the recipient, but what about the one providing the support? More than 150 years ago, Ellen G. White wrote that "doing good is a work that benefits both giver and receiver."⁵ Science now agrees. Several published scientific studies by Siegel, Friedmann, Allen, and others, for example, reveal that when a person provides love to their pets, they are healthier.

Back in the 1990s, The American Journal of Cardiology published an interesting study conducted by Friedmann and Thomas known as the Cardiac Arrhythmia Suppression Trial (CAST).⁶ The doctors studied men and women who had sustained a heart attack and had irregular heartbeats. Here are the surprising results:

- Only one of the 87 people (1.1%) who owned dogs died during the study
- Nineteen of the 282 people (6.7%) who did not own dogs died.
- Compared to dog owners, more than six times as many people who did not own dogs died, which seems to indicate that dog owners benefit from providing loving support to their pets.



Ironically, the drugs tested in the study — Encainide and Flecainide — actually caused an increase in cardiac deaths and had to be stopped prematurely. If these drugs had shown a sixfold decrease in deaths, you can be pretty sure that just about every doctor in the country would be prescribing them for patients with heart problems. When was the last time that your doctor gave you a prescription to improve your health by providing loving support to others or a pet?

SUPPORT IN THE FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY

The Commission on Children at Risk, a group of 33 children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth service professionals, found considerable support for the role played by authoritative communities in health. These are communities that have a firm basis for belief in their sacred scriptures and from which they derive a value base. For adults, religious faith and practice appear to have a sizable and consistent relationship with improved health and longevity, including less hypertension and depression, a lower risk of suicide, less criminal activity, and less use and abuse of drugs and alcohol.⁷



THE BOTTOM LINE

The purpose of building a social support network is to reduce stress levels, not add to them, so watch for situations that seem to drain our energy. For example, avoid spending too much time with someone who is constantly negative and critical. Similarly, steer clear of people involved in unhealthful behaviors such as alcohol or substance abuse, especially if you've struggled with these addictions yourself.

Taking the time to build a social support network is a wise investment, not only in your mental well-being but also in your physical health and longevity. Those who enjoy high levels of social support stay healthier and live longer than those who don't. So start making more friends or improving the relationships you already have. Whether you are the one receiving the support or the one providing encouragement, you will reap a plethora of rewards.

A BIBLICAL APPROACH

In light of the benefits of social support, this statement makes sense: "Christian kindness and earnest consecration are constantly to be manifest in the life."⁷ There are also many Bible verses that provide specific instruction on how to practice kindness and express loving social support to one another. Here are some examples:

- Love one another (John 13:35).
- Forgive one another (Colossians 3:13).
- Pray for one another (James 5:16).
- Comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18).
- Fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7).
- Be kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32).
- Show compassion to one another (1 Peter 3:8).
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9).
- Be hospitable to strangers (Genesis 18:2-5).
- Respect your neighbors (Exodus 20:15).



Having a meaningful relationship with the Lord will produce loving relationships with others and a desire to give them genuine support. We will appreciate one another as children of God, regardless of background. We will not have to worry about what to say or do because when we have a relationship with God, we will truly love one another, serve one another, strengthen and encourage one another, forgive one another, and pray for one another.

The social support we give and receive is very important to our overall health and well-being. Let us therefore live a life of praise to God by genuinely caring about the welfare of others.





WHAT IS A SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORK?

A social support network comprises friends, family and peers. It differs from other types of support groups in that it is not led by a mental health professional. Although both types of support groups can play important roles in times of stress, a social support network can be developed under conditions that are not stressful.

The network can simply be friends eating lunch together, neighbors chatting together, close relatives having a phone conversation, and even church members fellowshiping together. These are all ways to develop and foster lasting relationships with the people close to us.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GIVE AND TAKE

A successful relationship is a two-way street. The better a friend we are, the better our friends will be. Here are some suggestions for nurturing relationships:

- **Stay in touch.** Answering phone calls, returning e-mails, and reciprocating invitations let people know you care.
- **Don't compete.** Be happy instead of envious when friends succeed, and they'll celebrate your accomplishments in return.
- **Be a good listener.** Find out what's important to your friends.
- **Don't overdo it.** In your zeal to extend your social network, be careful not to overwhelm friends and family with phone calls and e-mails.
- **Appreciate friends and family.** Take time to say thank you and to express how important they are to you.

1 Julia Neuberger, "Face to Faith," The Guardian, January 1, 2010, accessed April 5, 2010, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/jan/02/social-networking-real-world-online. 2 Abraham Maslow, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: The Motivation Theory and Hierarchy of Needs From Abraham Maslow," March 3, 2011, accessed April 12, 2012, www.maslowshierarchyofneeds.net/maslows-love-and-belonging-needs. 3 L. F. Berkman and T. Glass, "Social Integration, Social Networks, Social Support, and Health," Social Epidemiology (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000), 137-73. See also L. F. Berkman and L. Syme, "Social Networks, Host Resistance, and Mortality: A Nine-Year Follow-Up Study of Alameda County Residents," American Journal of Epidemiology 192, no. 2 (1979), 186-204. 4 Rick Nauert, "Social Support Helps Women Beat Breast Cancer," PsychCentral, January 21, 2011, accessed April 13, 2012, <http://psychcentral.com/news/2011/01/21/social-support-helps-women-beat-breast-cancer>. 5 Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 2 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), 534. 6 Adapted from "How to Improve Your Social Skills: 8 Tips From the Last 2500 Years," PositivityBlog, accessed April 13, 2012, <http://www.positivityblog.com/index.php/2007/11/15/how-to-improve-your-social-skills-8-tips-from-the-last-2500-years>. 7 Ellen G. White, Medical Ministry (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1963), 204.



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