

Feeling Connected to Each Other is a Basic Human Need—Even For Wyomingites

My Dad likes Wyoming's sparse population, and says that he can love his fellow man a lot better when they're spread out, and there aren't so many close by.

For some people, having fewer neighbors is definitely one of the benefits of living in Wyoming. But for a lot of us, it can lead to feeling alone and isolated, which isn't very good for us.

In fact, feeling connected to others is fundamental to our overall health and well-being.

As someone working to help the community improve overall health, my first inclination was to place attention and emphasis on healthy eating and being active physically. For a lot of us, when you talk about health, that's where our minds go: eat right and get exercise. And, sure, they're super important, but that third piece, the emotional and mental health piece, belongs right up there.

And social connectedness is a major and important part of that emotional and mental health.

I came across a quote that rather sums this up: "Feeling connected to each other is a basic human need."

In Wyoming, we prize our independence and "rugged individualism," but remaining connected on some level is key to being happy and healthy—even, and, especially, out here in the wide open spaces.

A couple of experiences in the past couple of weeks have brought this theme to the forefront for me:

We watched a futuristic film last week that explored the loneliness and disconnection between people, despite, and even in large part *because of* the technological tools (e.g. phones, computer, social media, etc.) that are supposed to connect us. It isn't that rare of a theme, either—seeking to capture the quandary that is happening: these gadgets and online communities often do make life easier, are a lot of fun, and are supposed to build community, but it's also the reality that they are actually creating social isolation and decreasing human contact and connection. (A survey by health insurance company Cigna found that loneliness is very common in adults, and the younger generations—those most connected through these devices—were found to be the loneliest.)

After thinking about and discussing that reality, I was driving to work and heard a report on the radio in which they were talking about social isolation and how harmful it can be to the body and health, particularly for middle-aged men. In this story they stated that "having weak social relationships poses a greater mortality risk than physical inactivity or obesity." In other words, building and nurturing friendships might be just as important to your health as eating right and exercising. That kind of blew my mind and definitely came as a big surprise to me! So not only does being lonely feel bad, it also can make us sick! They reported on the importance of having social interactions with people, and a few small ways to do this, including striking up conversations with people while commuting (not so much our thing here,) but also just making eye contact with people we pass.

And then September is Suicide Prevention Month, and I've been doing a little research. On average, someone dies by suicide every 2 days in Wyoming. Our state has had one of the highest per-capita suicide rates in the nation for over 3 decades. In 2015, we were first in the nation (not a #1 you really aspire to.) The most recent data has us at 3rd with 24 suicides per 100,000 population. These rates make suicide the one of the leading causes of death, and really demonstrates the sad and desperate feelings

that a lot of folks are dealing with in our frontier state. It's become a serious public health issue. In working toward prevention, we look at what might be causing or contributing, and there are several factors that are considered important contributors for a state like ours, one of them being social isolation. In the county health ranking data that had Uinta County at #21, "Lack of social networks" was one of the factors that stood out as a piece of our low-ranking health picture.

And being lonely, and feeling isolated just feels bad! How connected we feel to others is a strong predictor of our happiness and our feelings of self-worth. Relationships give us purpose and give us resilience in dealing with life's ups and downs. It is a basic need for survival, but also for well-being.

Ugh. So what can we do? What can an individual who is feeling a little lonesome do?

Here is a strategy published by John Cacioppo (founder of the Univ. of Chicago's Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience.)

Extend Yourself: You need simple, regular experiences that provide "small doses of the positive sensations that come from positive social interactions"—something you can't get when isolated. He recommends starting with simple activities like attending social events and making small talk or volunteering in a setting that involves some social contact. (This might be hard at first—loneliness tends to hamper one's ability to do things that would diminish that sense of isolation.)

Action plan: Know that you have the capacity to take action that will help. It's important to realize you're not "adrift on a genetic and environmental raft over whose course [you] have no control," Cacioppo wrote. Just knowing that it's possible to take concrete steps toward eliminating even longstanding feelings of social isolation makes it easier to retrain your approach to interacting with the world. Picking things you want to be a part of and intentionally getting out in social settings can make a big difference.

Selection: Selecting social activities — and the people that come with them — that are of interest to you can make it a lot easier to connect with others, since any fellow attendees already share an interest with you. If running or reading is something you enjoy, join a running group or a book club.

Expect the best: If you enter a social activity expecting to be ignored or thinking that people won't be friendly, it's easy to turn that into a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, expecting warmth and connection makes it easier to project that same warmth — which is then more likely to be reciprocated. Along the same lines, Cacioppo wrote that it's important to be understanding if someone seems like they're blowing you off; that person may be having a bad day or may be struggling with something else on their own.

With this in mind, I was thinking that we could expand September's focus on Suicide Prevention and Awareness and add the emphasis of creating and building social connections. How about "Social-Connection September?" At least a couple times a month, we could make an effort to extend ourselves into a social activity or event of some kind. (Volunteering is a super way to make real contact with others.) It's good for us, of course, good for the community, and we could also pay attention to those who may need some connecting, and reach out with the friendliness and neighborliness that is also one of Wyoming's trademarks.