

**ABSTRACT**

**We are constantly reminded to take care of ourselves. We need a healthy and balanced diet, with regular exercises, and good quality rest. However, research has shown that social connectedness also plays an essential and critical function to our physical and mental well-being. Many studies have shown that lack of social connection is a predictor of social isolation, resulting in greater detriment to health. Strong social connectedness is associated with increased longevity, strengthening of ones' immune system, faster recovery from disease and, hence, a lengthening of one's life. Studies have also shown that people who feel more connected to others in relationships tend to generate a positive feedback loop in communicating and maintaining healthy social and emotional well-being with others in the family, workplace and community. This decreases the propensity to antisocial behaviour, isolation behaviour or poor mental health. Individuals with strong connectedness were observed to have lower rates of anxiety and depression; and higher self-esteem and were more empathic towards self and others, resulting in better emotional and psychological well-being. Social connectedness is a broad topic and can be reviewed from various perspectives. This article will review the concept from a psychological perspective of self, exploring the importance of practicing compassion intervention in social connectedness and self-care.**

**Keywords:**

**Social Connectedness, Physical and Mental Well-Being, Social Isolation, Self-Esteem, Social and Positive Psychology, Compassion Intervention, Self-Care**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The medical profession is a helping profession that relies on the use of empathic relationships, empirical approaches and factual analysis in the delivery of treatment and services to every patient. This is a profession that values teamwork, supervision, consultation and mentoring — a framework that encourages consultative collaborations. The industry itself is fast-paced and professionals are constantly subjected to high amounts of stress which can impinge on individual physical and mental well-being in the long run. Burnout among medical professionals is not uncommon.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the stressful nature of the industry belies the positive values that are inherent in a collaborative environment. Strong positive social connections and support networks have been proven to be helpful in overcoming and recovering from difficult situations and events.<sup>11,15</sup> They are important factors in strengthening resilience, preventing

burnout or compassion fatigue,<sup>15,25</sup> and are also proven to lead to better physical health, greater emotional well-being and higher levels of self-esteem and a sense of meaning.<sup>5</sup> In this article, we will be reviewing the definitions of social connection in different psychological subfields, its relationship with motivation and self-compassion, and, most importantly, its impact on physical and mental well-being.

**THE SOCIAL SELF IN PSYCHOLOGY**

Psychologists past and present have argued that social connection is the primary psychological need and motivator essential for human development and survival.<sup>28</sup> Early psychoanalytical theories view social groups and connections as important balancing factors that motivate the individual to curb innate aggressive drives.<sup>8</sup> From a developmental standpoint, appropriate social interactions are often part of the key benchmarks for maturity across developmental stages. The ability to relate warmly to others helps the forming of unions and increases opportunities of receiving guidance.<sup>28</sup> Theories on drive and motivation, such as the renowned hierarchy of needs by Maslow (1943),<sup>14</sup> highlighted the importance of 'love and belongingness' in the hierarchy of motivation development. Maslow stated that social connections and relationships are basic needs that a human being requires to fully function as an individual. The humanistic and relational standpoint also reiterates that the self-actualised individual should be capable of strong feelings of empathy and affection for all human beings and is capable of greater love, deeper friendship, and more complete identification with others.<sup>14</sup>

Among the fields of psychology, social psychology sought in particular to understand how individual behaviour, cognition and emotions may be affected by the social context. It was suggested that even our concept of self relies on information we draw from social interactions. This concept of self is not defined by how others see us, but how we "imagine" they see us — dubbed the 'looking-glass self'.<sup>29,30</sup> When others think well of us, it helps us to think well of ourselves. These social-derived self-concepts in turn organise and guide our processing of information relevant to our self-development and self-perception. For example, a young child who is labelled gifted, hardworking and helpful will incorporate these traits in the development of their self-concept when they grow into adulthood. Those who are threatened with negative stereotypes of their academic ability tend to struggle more in their self-esteem and self-confidence as adults.

**SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS IN RELATIONSHIPS**

Besides the influences on the intrapersonal self, social connections are inevitably about the interpersonal dimension. Social connection is defined as a person's subjective sense of

having close and positively experienced relationships with others in the social world.<sup>22</sup> Strong and positive social connections established through relationships with others can enhance various social functions for the individual,<sup>10</sup> such as the following types of supportive behaviours that are reciprocated through established relationships:

- a) The presence of **emotional support** that involves the use and availability of empathy, love, trust and caring;
- b) The presence of **instrumental support** that involves the use and availability of tangible aid and services that directly assist an individual in need;
- c) The presence of **informational support** that involves the use and availability of advice, suggestions, and information that an individual can use to address problems; and
- d) The presence of **appraisal support** that involves the use of information that is useful for self-evaluation purposes, such as the analysis of constructive feedback and affirmation.

The above factors are crucial support factors necessary in relationships, and healthy reciprocal relationships in turn contribute to a person's growth, health, and emotional and overall well-being. This reiterates the earlier viewpoints of the different psychological theories — it is where the intrinsic strengthening of personality occurs, where one develops a self-construct, self-concept, self-esteem and resiliency to deal with adversity.

## SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND WELL-BEING

So how exactly does social connection enhance our individual happiness? According to self-determination theory, individual well-being is determined by motivations and goals which are tied to three specific innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.<sup>31,32</sup> Relatedness refers to the state of being connected to others—family, friends, partners, etc. Humans have a need to belong, a motivation to bond with others in relationships that provide ongoing, positive interactions.<sup>28</sup> Research shows that to perceive happiness, one needs to have relatedness with others, sense of competency with self and task entrusted, as well as a sense of autonomy in executing the task.

This idea of well-being leads to self-satisfaction and happiness, which encompasses a host of psychological benefits. The more individuals experience positive emotions, the more it will help them to broaden resources and optimise their performance in work and in life. To connect with this inner well-being, we need to broaden our:

- a) intellectual resources — developing our creativity and flexible thinking;
- b) social resources — developing and strengthening our ability to connect with others;
- c) physical resources — improving our health and

coordination; and

- d) psychological resources — enhancing our resiliency and optimism.

Specifically on the work front, positive emotions and happiness are often a precursor of success and well-being, leading to the development of qualities that lead to success.<sup>13</sup> In the work environment, individual well-being and satisfaction is tied to factors such as work demand, control and autonomy. It has been found that even in the face of high work demand and low sense of control, individuals may still report low stress levels and positive emotional states if they perceive sufficient social support in the work environment; and this is regardless of individual differences of stress coping.<sup>33</sup> This correlation of individual well-being and positive social support in the workplace, from supervisors or peers, can also have long-term effects on both physical and psychological health.<sup>34,35</sup>

The benefits of social connectedness on one's self-concept and the positive effect of relationships are not isolated. In relating to others, when one perceives one's sense of self overlapping with that of others, the sense of similarity induces positive feelings, driving one to pursue cohesion and common identities to reinforce the sense of belongingness and positivity.<sup>22</sup> It is, however, not merely an issue of the commonness of identity. The affective quality of the relationship matters as well. The closer the relationship, the more powerful the support it provides to oneself, and such an intimate and affectionate social connection has been found to be a strong predictor of happiness, of physical and mental health, as well as longevity.<sup>24</sup>

## SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Some might question how social connectedness can have an impact on individual well-being beyond a subjective appraisal of individual emotional states and into actual physical health. In terms of actual lifespan, people who have strong social networks tend to live longer.<sup>1</sup> In his journalistic exploration of geographic regions around the world where more centenarians have been found, author and explorer Dan Buettner has also identified that social engagement and family engagement are common factors in the lifestyles of cultures that see greater longevity.<sup>4</sup>

Research in health has found that the different networks, reciprocity, support and trust that make up an individual's social capital are positively related to health.<sup>7</sup> The heart and blood pressure of people with healthy relationships respond better to stress.<sup>36</sup> Strong social connections are associated with a healthier endocrine system and healthier cardiovascular functioning.<sup>37,38</sup> Healthy social connections enhance the immune system's ability to fight off infectious diseases.<sup>39</sup>

The opposite of social connection is isolation and loneliness, marked by the absence, or subjective perception of absence, of a positive social connection with others.<sup>9</sup> The loneliness factor,

observed as an opposite of social connectedness, is a state that is associated with negative emotionality and even suicide predisposition. It has been found that that social ostracism evokes a brain response similar to that triggered by physical pain.<sup>40</sup> Health risks from being alone or isolated in one's life are comparable in magnitude to the risks associated with cigarette smoking, blood pressure, and obesity.<sup>10</sup>

**SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND HEALTH BEHAVIOURS**

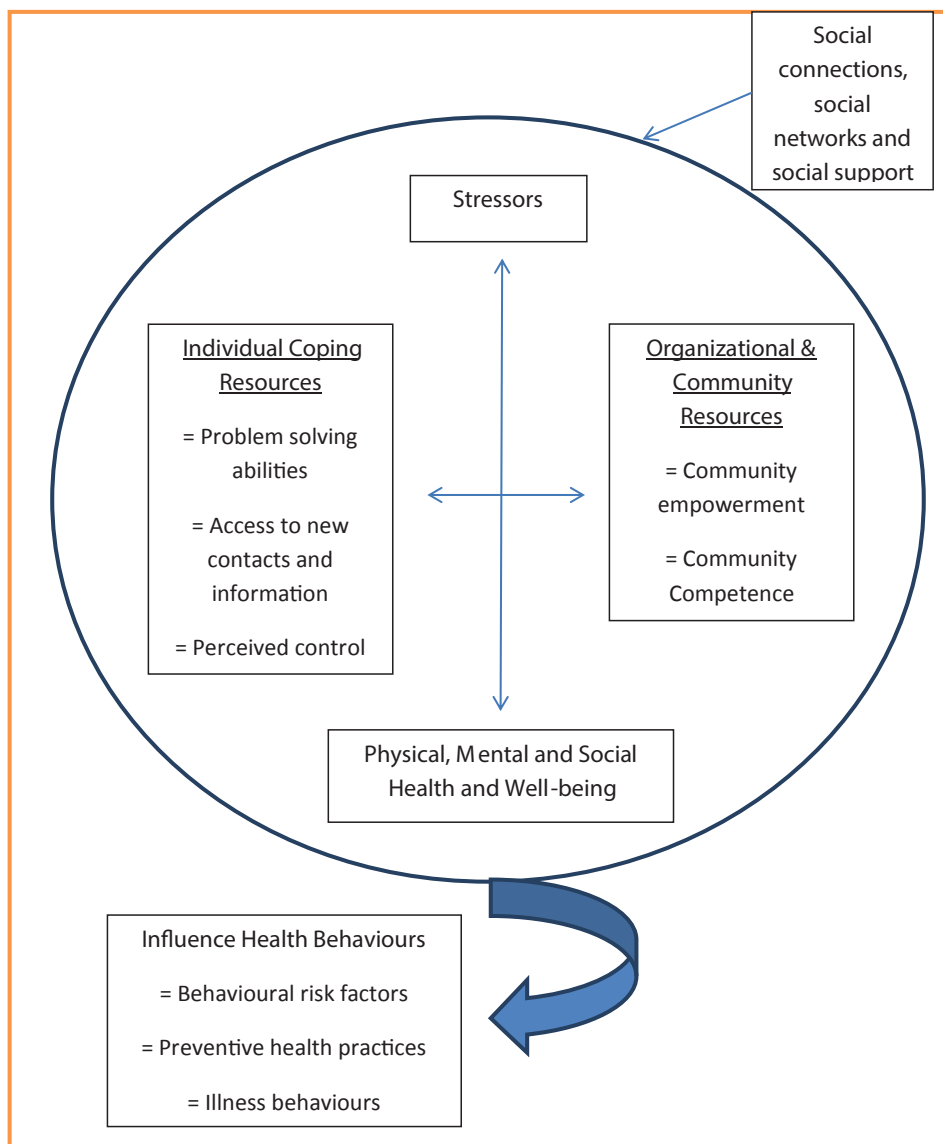
From the many studies of health and social connections, we present a conceptual model (Figure 1) that illustrates how social connections may impact physical, mental and social health. This model proposed by Heaney and Israel (2008)<sup>8</sup> presents social connections as the starting point or initiator of a causal flow towards health outcomes. It also illustrates the many relationships between the factors in the model and their

reciprocal influence on one another. For example, one's health status will influence the extent to which one is able to maintain and mobilise a social network and the resources accessible and available for an individual in need. By meeting the basic human needs for companionship, intimacy, a sense of belonging, and reassurance of one's worth as a person, supportive ties may enhance well-being and health, regardless of the stress levels.<sup>1</sup>

The theory of symbolic interactionism suggests that human behaviour is affected by the meaning that people assign to events, and this meaning is derived largely from their social interactions.<sup>2</sup> Therefore people's social connections may help them re-interpret events or problems in a more positive and constructive manner, hence increasing their ability to cope.<sup>23</sup>

On a practical level, social connections can enhance a person's ability to access new contacts and information, and identify or solve problems. For example, if connections and support can

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Relationship between Social Network and Social Support to Health**



provide assistance to reduce uncertainty and unpredictability and help to produce desired outcomes, then a sense of personal control over specific situations and life domains will improve.<sup>8</sup>

On a community level, strengthening social connections and enhancing exchange of social support may increase a community's ability to utilise its resources and solve problems. Several community-level interventions have shown how intentional network building and strengthening of social connections within communities are associated with enhanced community capacity and control.<sup>16</sup>

Resources at both individual and community levels can have direct health-enhancing effects and may diminish the negative effects on health due to exposure to stressors. When people experience stressors, having enhanced individual or community resources increases the likelihood that stressors will be handled or coped with in a way that reduces both short-term and long-term adverse health consequences.<sup>8</sup> For example, for someone who suffered the loss of a job or a loved one, having strong social connections and support will influence the coping process and buffer the effects of the stressors on health. At the same time, these good social connections and networks can provide information about new jobs and reduce the likelihood that a person will suffer from long-term unemployment.

Furthermore, through positive social connections and interpersonal exchanges within a social network, individuals are influenced and supported in health behaviours, such as adherence to medical regimens, help-seeking behaviours, smoking cessation, and weight management.<sup>6,19,26</sup> Through influences on preventive health behaviour, illness behaviour, and sick-role behaviour, social connections may affect the incidence of recovery from disease.<sup>8</sup>

Considering the brief information presented so far, it is not difficult to see the multiple positive influences of social connectedness on healthy individuals, and the pitfalls of social isolation. Like the many factors in our lives that we can influence for the betterment of our health and well-being, it is possible to alter levels of social connection and cultivate the social connectedness to benefit our health and well-being. Emma Seppala and colleagues outlined the methods that are effective in boosting social connections in their article and these methods are built on the key factor of compassion.<sup>22</sup>

## COMPASSION INTERVENTIONS

Compassion, which blends the recognition of suffering and the desire to help, is deemed to be an evolutionary factor that is essential to our survival. It is a factor that can be seen in infants and even primates, and contributes to the formation of social connections between humans.<sup>22</sup>

Several intervention studies have been developed to increase compassion and thereby increase social connection. Compassion training has been found to increase pro-social

behavior, and the following intervention types have been found to be useful in training compassion and increasing social connection:

- a) cognition-based compassion training intervention — lowers chronic stress and improves interpersonal functioning;
- b) mindfulness-based stress reduction — increases life satisfaction, helps in coping with loneliness, and results also point out that altruism and compassion can be learned and can have profound effects on an individual; and
- c) loving-kindness meditation — increases people's positive emotions, increases implicit and explicit social connections which in turn helps decrease illnesses and increase social support.

The application of compassion should apply to the self as much as to others. The mindfulness interventions are deemed essential in identifying our own difficult experiences, but interventions that focus on compassion require that we embrace ourselves with warmth even while we accept our painful experiences.

Individuals who have higher levels of self-compassion tend to brood less about individual misfortunes, their lack of rumination contributes to fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression<sup>[20]</sup>. Even for individuals who have higher esteem, optimism, and secure self, having more self-compassion helps them adjust better psychologically after difficult life events<sup>[21]</sup>.

In terms of interaction and social connections, individuals who have greater self-compassion tend to be willing to apologise for negative behavior, accept personal accountability,<sup>3</sup> and be able to maintain emotional stability in the face of positive or negative feedback from others.<sup>12</sup> Being good to oneself helps us to be good to others, and self-compassionate people tend to be more giving in relationships, being perceived as more caring, accepting, and supporting of autonomy, leading to a greater sense of satisfaction and security in their partners.<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSION

So it would seem that, just as the social factor has myriad influences on the self, the self is the key towards strengthening the social factor. Building positive relationships with others perhaps should ideally begin with relating positively with the self. Considering the implications of working in the healthcare profession where relating with others is the norm — whether it's the patient, the family or someone in the multidisciplinary team — it is serendipitous that the key falls to compassion. While the expectation readily falls on the healthcare worker to relate positively to others in their suffering, it is important to note that the healthcare worker should not fall to despair and self-pity in the process<sup>[17]</sup>. As caregivers, we do need to recognise that we deserve the same warmth and positivity that we give to others, and while others benefit from how we relate to them, we can ensure that we yield the benefits of social connectedness through relating positively and compassionately with ourselves.

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## LEARNING POINTS

- **Social connectedness is just as essential and critical in our physical and mental well-being.**
- **Positive social connections and interpersonal exchanges within a social network can influence and support health behaviours; and serve as a preventive measure to illness behaviour, or sick-role behaviour, thus increasing the rate of recovery from disease.**
- **Social connection is defined as a person's subjective sense of having close and positively experienced relationships with others in the social world. These include social relationships within the family, community, workplace, etc.**
- **Compassion to self and others as an intervention is viewed as an essential practice in social connectedness.**