



# Working TOWARD Wellness

LIVE BETTER. LIVE LONGER.

W E L L N E S S B R O C H U R E

## Social BY NATURE

Do you find you spend less time with others in winter, particularly after the holidays? When it is dark and cold it is easy to fall into a rut: get up, go to work, come home, eat, watch TV, and go to bed. Often, little time is given to connecting and interacting with family and friends. If this becomes a pattern, it can become a problem, leading to a number of physical and mental health issues.

A meaningful social network, whether it consists of one friend or a large group of people, has many positive effects on health. One of the most significant effects is the feeling of happiness and contentment with life. Overall happiness has been associated with longer life spans, better immune system functioning, and healthier lifestyles. On the flip side, a lack of social connection has negative impacts on health, such as decreased immune system functioning and higher stress levels.

It is not surprising that feeling connected is fundamental to our health and well-being because humans are social by nature. Something as simple as sharing dinner with friends or family can lower our stress level and increase contentment. Unfortunately, some people have inadequate social contacts. This may be due to depression, avoidance of people, physical isolation, and limited mobility.

Without a doubt, winter can dish out some nasty weather conditions that can make everyday activities more difficult. Although bad weather can happen at any time of the year, winter tends to keep more of us inside. This can lead to social isolation. Added to this, many people prefer warmer weather and simply do not like leaving the house. When we find ourselves, or others we know, spending a lot of time inside, more of an effort is needed to get involved in social and recreational outings, and to perhaps learn how to dress warmer for outside activities.

When thinking about your social connections, keep in mind that occasionally choosing to be alone can also be a great stress reliever and source of inner peace. Your relationship with yourself is an important friendship that needs to be nurtured as much as relationships with others. So, this winter think about reconnecting with friends, family, and yourself for a healthier, happier you!

### TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE... THEN READ ON. T F

1. Your mental well-being will get a boost this winter by staying active.
2. Caring for a pet can help ease the sense of social isolation during the winter.
3. If you are too busy to have an occasional family meal, then you may be too busy.
4. Planning elaborate meals helps to bring family members closer together.
5. A large group of friends is the only way to enjoy the health benefits of social contacts.
6. Having meaningful social connections can lead to a healthier cardiovascular system.
7. Changes in the level of daylight in winter can lead to low mood.
8. High levels of stress chemicals are linked to high blood pressure.
9. During the winter, some people have a hard time getting around outside.
10. Our relationships can influence our health-related behavior.

*see answers on back panel*

## BENEFITS OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

### In the short-term:

- Lower blood pressure
- Improved immune system function
- Feelings of happiness and contentment

### In the long-term:

- Increased ability to cope with stress
- Decreased depressive symptoms
- Healthier cardiovascular system



## WHY ARE SOCIAL CONTACTS SO IMPORTANT?

Spending time with friends and family is essential to good health in general. People who have more social support have better health and people who feel lonely, with few social supports, tend to have more health problems.

As we all know, too much stress can have negative impacts on our health. This is partly because stress chemicals, like cortisol, are linked to serious health problems like: abdominal obesity, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, auto-immune disorders, and possibly others. This is one of the main reasons behind the benefits of social connections. Family, friends, and co-workers can help solve problems and deal with hardship. When we have others to help us cope with stress, our immune and nervous systems function



better. People who report feeling happy and who spend time with others often have lower levels of stress chemicals in their bodies. This helps fight off sickness better than a socially isolated person. Several studies have found that happy people exposed to a virus had a lower risk of getting sick.

Our relationships can also influence our health-related behaviours. Friends and family can help us access services, such as seeing a doctor when needed. They can also motivate us to become and stay healthy.



## HOW CAN WE BECOME MORE SOCIALLY CONNECTED?

### GET STARTED

There is no one suggestion or activity that will be THE solution for dealing with being less socially connected during the winter months. One approach is to view winter as a time to get reconnected and spend more quality time with friends, family, and your community in ways that promote good health, for both you and others.

### TAKE STEPS

#### Being Active

In addition to the many physical health benefits you can achieve through regular physical activity, your mental well-being will also get a boost. Benefits include higher self-esteem, more energy, and better coping skills for dealing with stress.

Whether you enjoy being active outdoors or indoors, include activities that will bring you together with others. Here are some suggestions to consider:

- Try new indoor activities that you wouldn't try at other times of the year when you'd rather be outside. For example, join a bowling, curling, or volleyball league, or visit an indoor driving range.
- Check out your local parks and recreation departments that guide groups of people on winter hikes and walks. As a bonus, you can learn more about how the natural environment adapts during the winter. This is also a great family activity.
- Participate in a mall-walking program. Many malls host these programs during the colder months.

#### Eating Together

Sharing meals with others can be a very effective way of connecting socially with our family, friends, co-workers, and others.

Despite the challenge faced by many families to find enough time for family meals, their importance cannot be overstated. In addition to helping form strong family bonds, family meals help improve communication between parents and children. As well, family meals are often more nutritious. When it comes to friends and co-workers, think of ways to share in food-related activities. Here are a few suggestions to consider:

- Organize a Soup Potluck with friends or co-workers. Ask them to bring their favourite healthy soup for lunch or an evening meal.
- Host a weekend brunch that features one of the all-time winter comfort foods: Oatmeal. Set it up like a salad bar, with lots of different toppings, including fruit, yogurt, nuts, etc.

### OTHER SUGGESTIONS

To help expand your social support network and ease the sense of isolation during the winter (and throughout the year), try these ideas:

- Join a hobby group that holds weekly or monthly meetings. Or organize your own informal group by asking a few friends or co-workers to meet regularly to work on a common hobby.

## WHAT KEEPS US ISOLATED?

Regardless of the season, people face many barriers to social interaction. Some common reasons are lack of time, low self-esteem, fear, social anxiety, and depression. However, along with these issues, winter presents added challenges.

During winter our bodies adapt to the cold in many ways. Melatonin and serotonin, neurotransmitters that affect sleep and mood, change due to shorter days. For some, this can lead to increased sleepiness and a low mood. These physiological changes can lead

to feeling a little down (the “winter blues”) and having less energy.

Other barriers people face in winter relate to getting around every day. Activities such as walking or driving can become dangerous depending on weather conditions. For older people this can be particularly limiting and isolating. Along with this, some simply do not like the cold. They find the physical sensation uncomfortable and even painful. In this case, there are several ideas in the next section on how to be active and socially connected indoors.

# WHAT

- Get a pet. If you are up for the commitment, caring for an animal can do much to provide comfort. It may also help create opportunities to participate in activities with other pet owners. If you choose a dog, your physical health will also benefit from the walking and active play you will both enjoy.
- Go back to school. Take a community college or university course to expand your knowledge and to meet people who have similar interests.

Volunteering can do wonders for your own mental well-being. You may also be helping others feel less isolated and more connected with the community. Here are some tips:

- Invite a neighbour who doesn't get out much to share weekly meals with you. During bad weather conditions, bring them a warm meal and stay for a visit.
- Find a cause. Hospitals, museums, places of worship, or community centres often need volunteers. Or you may consider more time-limited activities, such as helping out with a community clean-up project or with local elections. Strong connections can be formed when you work with people who share a mutual interest.
- Offer to shovel driveways, steps, and sidewalks for neighbours who can't do it themselves. Contact your local public works department about volunteering for a snow removal program.

As you expand your social network, be aware that some relationships may be unhealthy, oppressive, or too restrictive. These relationships can be just as damaging as having no connections at all.

Although being with others may help you feel more connected, having quiet, “alone” time for personal reflection and relaxation is also healthy. For some, that may include practicing their faith. For others, reading, meditation, or a relaxing bath may work.

Whichever suggestions you try, there will likely be benefits for your physical health and mental well-being. As a bonus, these suggestions may benefit others too!

## GO FOR IT!

### RESOURCES AND WEBSITES

**Canadian Mental Health Association  
Aging and Loneliness**  
[www.cmha.ca/bins/content\\_page.asp?cid=2-74&lang=1](http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=2-74&lang=1)

**Canadian Health Network**  
[www.canadianhealthnetwork.ca](http://www.canadianhealthnetwork.ca)  
(Search “loneliness”)

**Iowa State University**  
**How to get your family back to the table**  
[www.extension.iastate.edu/  
Publications/N3407A.pdf](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/N3407A.pdf)

**Mayo Clinic**  
**Developing Social Supports**  
[www.mayoclinic.com/health/support  
groups/MH00041](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/support-groups/MH00041)

**Ontario Safety League-  
Winter Driving**  
[www.osl.org/print/winter.htm](http://www.osl.org/print/winter.htm)

**United Way of Canada**  
[www.unitedway.ca/](http://www.unitedway.ca/)  
(link to your local UW office for  
volunteering opportunities)

**Winter Green**  
**Outdoor family activities.**  
[www.goforgreen.ca/winter\\_green/](http://www.goforgreen.ca/winter_green/)

**www.  
wehealthunit  
.org**

# FAMILY MEALS

and how to make them happen

Family meals can help family members stay connected. Many of these tips also apply to meals shared among close friends who provide strong social support for one another. Here are some suggestions for planning family meals:

- Keep meals simple. Spend less time preparing and more time with the family.
- Eat at a table. It's easier to talk and listen when you are face to face.
- Involve everyone. Consider it a team effort, from preparation to clean-up.
- Eliminate interruptions and distractions. Turn off the TV and let the answering machine take phone messages.
- Stick to easy conversation - no nagging or complaining. Encourage everyone to share ideas, daily news, and focus on the positive.

Try to have at least one family meal-time each week. Set a goal that includes when and what to have. Also, identify who will help with each task. Consider the following sample goal made with family input:

*Our family will have supper together next Wednesday at 5:30 pm. I will make my 30-minute chili with Ken, my 12-year old, and have applesauce and ginger cookies for dessert. Sherry will set the table and Dad will clean up.*

Remember, if you are too busy to have a family meal at least occasionally, then you may be TOO busy!

## PASS IT ON!

Please feel free to pass this brochure along to co-workers, family members and friends.

CLIP AND KEEP THIS INFORMATION!

# MAKE IT HAPPEN

## ... AT YOUR WORKPLACE!

Here are some ways to encourage and support staying socially connected in your workplace:

- Organize weekly or bi-weekly soup or chili days in which employees are invited to bring a favourite soup to share during the meal break. Provide a location where slow-cookers can be plugged in to keep the soup warm.
- Offer a weekly sports program in a local school gym or community centre. Activities could include volleyball, floor hockey, indoor soccer, etc.
- Start a hobby group that meets regularly before or after work, or during lunch breaks to share ideas. Suggestions include: knitting, photography, or scrapbooking.

- Invite local clubs to encourage employees to try new winter activities, such as cross-country skiing, winter camping, or snow-shoeing.
- Ensure that employees have adequate seating and space in a comfortable setting in which to have meals together.
- Encourage co-workers who often eat and take breaks on their own to join you or your group.



*"A friend is one of the nicest things you can have, and one of the best things you can be."*

Douglas Pagels

### Key References

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Canadian Health Network. (2005). *Happy people are healthier*. Retrieved November 10, 2005, from [www.canadianhealthnetwork.ca/servlet/ContentServer?cid=1127088763680&pagename=CHNRCS%2FCHNResource%2FCHNResourcePageTemplate&c=CHNResource&lang=En](http://www.canadianhealthnetwork.ca/servlet/ContentServer?cid=1127088763680&pagename=CHNRCS%2FCHNResource%2FCHNResourcePageTemplate&c=CHNResource&lang=En)

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Answers (from front page): 1-T • 2-T • 3-T • 4-F • 5-F • 6-T • 7-T • 8-T • 9-T • 10-T

For more information about the Working Toward Wellness Program, please contact the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit at 258-2146 x 3100.

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