

# Community: A sense of belonging

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*Staying well – we know we need the right diet and regular exercise. But the need to belong and stay connected to others is essential too.*

## **The need to belong**

We are social beings who all need to feel that we belong. Feeling that we are part of a group helps us to feel safe and secure, but we also learn from groups. Small children learn values, as well as the norms of how to behave and fit in from people around them, through a process social psychologists call socialisation. By learning these values and norms, children gain the knowledge they need to succeed in the group, and healthy socialisation is a strong predictor of future health and happiness.

Of course things don't always go to plan, as peer pressure can lead children and young people to engage in unhealthy behaviours in order to fit in. Much unhealthy group behaviour is driven by the 'them and us' response, a variation on the 'fight-or-flight' stress reaction, which causes groups to bond together against outsiders.

So what can parents do to influence the behaviours and values their children adopt? Judith Rich Harris, author of *The Nurture Assumption*, recommends that parents work together to agree how they will shape their children's values and aspirations collectively, in tune with the need for community.

## **Loneliness – nature's warning system**

Research shows that social isolation, and an unmet need for community, drives up the risk of people experiencing depression or anxiety. How do we know when we are at risk? Feelings of loneliness are nature's way of telling us that a need is unmet, whether for community, emotional connection or the giving and receiving of attention. All too often, however, we don't act until our emotional wellbeing is affected. For example, inflammation, recently identified as a symptom which often accompanies depression, can cause us to feel the need to retreat into a safe place where we can recover. But by retreating, we risk isolating ourselves further, when connecting up to others might be the best way to help us recover from physical and mental ill health.

## **The benefits of staying connected**

So what are the benefits to our emotional health of staying connected? Evidence from the town of Frome in Somerset shows that when people's need for community is met, the benefits are huge. Frome has an extensive network of volunteers, who visit people at risk of isolation, as well as community groups which people can attend and take part in. For those people who are affected by health issues, the support they receive from volunteers and community groups reduced emergency hospital admissions by 17% of a three year period. At the same time, admissions across Somerset rose by 29%. This finding has been heralded by medical health professionals as a hugely important finding – although it may seem like common sense to many of us. Perhaps the findings from Frome present us with an opportunity to connect with one another and ensure that we can secure our need for emotional need for community together.

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