

Social Ties and Good Health



Man is a social animal and has been throughout [evolution](#). All of our ancestors lived in tribes or extended families, as the apes still do. One exception was the outcasts. In many animal and human societies certain weaker individuals are excluded from the social group. **The result is usually early death.**

Our society has been trying out a major lifestyle innovation since the turn of the century. A new concept called **privacy** has become increasingly popular. After millions of years of living in tribes or extended families, in the late 1940s more and more people began to live in small nuclear families. More recently, even that social unit has broken down and living completely alone has become a trend. Households consisting of only one person rose from 3.7% in 1790 to 9.3% in 1950, 13.1% in 1960, 18.3% in 1973, and 24% in 1990. While living alone is considered by our culture to be a desirable luxury made possible by affluence, its effect on health and longevity is frightening.

Objectively good attitudes should have a positive effect on health and longevity. Using this objective criterion, being a self-contained loner is clearly an unhealthy attitude because it significantly increases your chances of bad health and early death. Just as the outcasts of primitive societies quickly sicken and die, people with poor social connections in our society have significantly worse life expectancies. Could our experiment with this new concept of privacy turn out to be a disastrous mistake that helps only the economy? Only time will tell.

Connected People Live Longer

The toxic effects of loneliness are confirmed by insurance statistics and numerous scientific studies. For example, one study of 972 Johns Hopkins medical students used results of personality tests to classify the students into one of five types. Thirty years later when they checked health status, they found that students classified as "loners" had *sixteen times* more cancer than people who vented their emotions to friends. Study after study has shown that feeling connected with other people is extremely important for physical and mental health. Suicide, alcoholism and mental illness rates are much higher among people living alone.

A massive study of 4,725 randomly selected residents of Alameda County in California found that those with the fewest close friends, relatives and social connections had mortality rates that *were two to three times higher* than those with high levels of social connectedness. Also, life expectancy tables show a difference of *nine years* between people with very poor social connections and those with very good ones.

Any social animal has an instinctive craving for social connections. We long to be a part of something larger than ourselves. Yet in today's society that longing often goes unsatisfied. One third of all children in the U.S. today are raised in a household with only one or no parents present. In the Afro-American community



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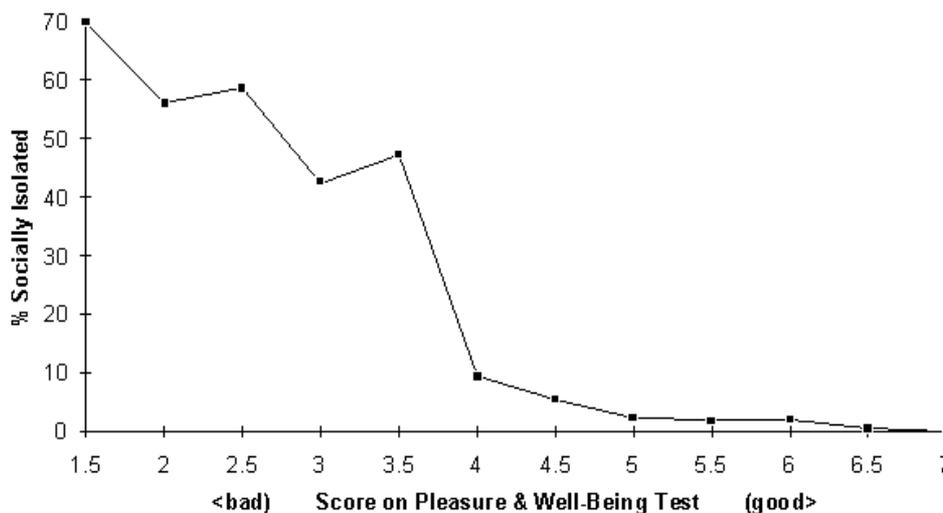
this figure rises to two-thirds. Street gangs are a pathetic attempt by these unfortunate children to satisfy their urge to belong.

When we were young most of us formed many social connections in school. We felt an integral part of our school, our classroom and our family. After leaving school most people's social connections begin to narrow. Today it is common to take a job far away from parents in order to enjoy privacy. Children used to provide a rapid substitute family connection, but today many people defer parenthood till much later so that they can enjoy their privacy. People used to talk to neighbors from porch swings or back yards are now isolated by fences and enclosed porches.

We all have a primitive need to feel that we are a part of something and that we are loved and supported by the rest of the herd. Do you have that feeling? Do you have close friends or family members with whom you discuss your innermost feelings? If the answer is no, your first attitude jogging goal should be to take some manageable step towards correcting the situation.

Social Isolation and Pleasure

The more than 3,000 elderly subjects who took the pleasure and well-being test were also asked questions about their social connections, such as whether they had good friends and family. When the results were plotted it was found that social isolation had an amazingly strong association with low scores on the pleasure and well-being test.



Seventy percent of the people with scores below 1.5 were considered socially isolated while *none* of the people with a perfect score of seven were isolated.



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Generally anyone with a score of less than 3.5 had a high probability of being socially isolated.

Since self-regulation also correlates strongly with the pleasure score, the real cause and effect probably starts with bad self-regulation, which leads to social isolation, which leads to unhappiness and a low score on the pleasure and well-being test. The cause and effect thus looks like this:

Poor Self-regulation --> Social Isolation --> Low Pleasure and Well-Being

Insurance statistics show us that good "social connections" can make a 3,285 day (9 year) difference in your life expectancy. If avoiding second-hand smoke (50 days) is limiting your social life, you are certainly shortening your life by trying to lengthen it. Good social connections means that you have close friends, family, co-workers, in-laws, children, clubs, church and other supportive connections with other people. In fact just being married makes a 1,825 day (5 year) difference in your life expectancy.

The effect of diverse social connections on your immune system has even been demonstrated scientifically. In a 1997 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Dr. Shelon Cohen reported an experiment where 276 paid volunteers were intentional exposed to a cold virus using a nasal spray. Before the exposure, they were tested to determine the number of kinds of people they spoke to at least every two weeks. The people with fewer than three types of social contacts turned out to be **four times more likely to come down with cold symptoms** than those with six or more. (Cohen '97)

