Your Friends and Your Social Well-Being

Close friendships are vital to health, happiness, and even workplace productivity

BY TOM RATH AND JIM HARter
Adapted from Wellbeing: The Five Essential Elements

There is something about having close friendships in general that is good for our physiological health. Relationships serve as a buffer during tough times, which in turn improves our cardiovascular functioning and decreases stress levels. On the other hand, people with very few social ties have nearly twice the risk of dying from heart disease and are twice as likely to catch colds -- even though they are less likely to have the exposure to germs that comes from frequent social contact.

If you're in a strained relationship, it could extend the time it takes for you to recover from surgery or a major injury.

To study how one of our closest relationships influences our physical health, a team of researchers designed a clever experiment in which they studied how stress levels affect the time it takes to recover from a wound. The researchers brought 42 married couples into a hospital and created several small wounds on their arms. They then placed devices over the wounds to measure the rate of healing.

The results revealed that it took almost twice as long for the wounds to heal for couples who reported having hostility in their relationship. So if you're in a strained relationship, it could extend the time it takes for you to recover from surgery or a major injury. As scientists continue to explore the connection between our relationships and our health, they are discovering that our Social Well-Being might have even more influence on how quickly we recover than conventional risk factors.

Another implication from this research is that proximity matters. A friend who lives within a mile of you will likely have more influence on your well-being than a friend who lives several miles away. Even your next-door neighbor's well-being has an impact on yours.

Because your entire social network affects your health, habits, and well-being, mutual friendships matter even more. These are relationships in which you and one of your close friends share a friendship with a third person. Investing in these mutual relationships will lead to even higher levels of well-being. This is why it is critical for us to do what we can to strengthen the entire network around us. Simply put, we have stock in others' well-being.

Every hour of social time keeps stress away

In addition to close relationships and proximity, the sheer amount of time we spend socializing matters. The data suggest that to have a thriving day, we need six hours of social time. When we get at least six hours of daily social time, it increases our well-being and minimizes stress and worry. Just so you don't think that six hours of social time is unattainable in one day, it's important to note that the six hours includes time at work, at home, on the telephone, talking to friends, sending e-mail, and other communication.

When people have almost no social time in a given day, they have an equal chance of having a good day or a bad day. However, each hour of social time quickly decreases the odds of having a bad day. Even three hours of social time reduces the chances of having a bad day to 10%. And each additional hour of social time -- up to about six hours -- improves the odds of having a good day.

While six hours of social time in one day might seem like a lot, people with thriving Social Well-Being average about six hours a day. Even when we studied subgroups of people with various personality types (from outgoing to introverted) and compared weekdays to weekends, each additional hour of social time in a day had a measureable benefit.

Beyond the immediate increase in well-being that comes with each hour of social time,
the long-term benefits can be even more profound, particularly as we age. A study of more than 15,000 people over the age of 50 found that among those who were socially active, their memories declined at less than half the rate compared to those who were the least social.

**Without a friend, work is a lonely place**

Friendships have tremendous implications in the workplace too. Gallup has conducted extensive studies on the value of workplace friendships, and one of the most revealing questions we have asked more than 15 million employees all over the world is whether they have a “best friend at work.” We use this very specific wording because early research indicated that having a “best friend” at work was a more powerful predictor of workplace outcomes than simply having a “friend” or even a “good friend.”

What is it about a close friendship in the workplace that makes such a profound difference?

Our research revealed that just 30% of employees have a best friend at work. Those who do are seven times as likely to be engaged in their jobs, are better at engaging customers, produce higher quality work, have higher well-being, and are less likely to get injured on the job. In sharp contrast, those without a best friend in the workplace have just a 1 in 12 chance of being engaged.

What is it about a close friendship in the workplace that makes such a profound difference? To find out, we examined what momentary experiences throughout the course of a day lead to higher well-being and engagement. We discovered that the single best predictor is not what people are doing -- but who they are with.

It doesn’t even matter if two friends at work are engaged in tasks that are directly related to workplace productivity. According to a study conducted by a team of MIT researchers in which workers wore high-tech identity badges throughout the day that monitored their movements and conversations, idle chit-chat might actually be valuable to productivity. The researchers found that even small increases in social cohesiveness lead to large gains in production.

If you don’t work in an office building filled with people and places to congregate, it’s still possible to develop close relationships. Roland, a project manager with thriving Social Well-Being explained: “The three people I work with most are scattered across the country, and we only see each other in person a couple times per year. But it is rare that a day or even a weekend passes when we are not discussing politics or sports via e-mail.” The most progressive organizations realize how technology can enable not just work-related tasks, but also help workers stay personally connected.

### The Five Essential Elements of Well-Being

For more than 50 years, Gallup scientists have been exploring the demands of a life well-lived. More recently, in partnership with leading economists, psychologists, and other acclaimed scientists, Gallup has uncovered the common elements of well-being that transcend countries and cultures. This research revealed the universal elements of well-being that differentiate a thriving life from one spent suffering. They represent five broad categories that are essential to most people:

- **Career Well-Being**: how you occupy your time -- or simply liking what you do every day
- **Social Well-Being**: having strong relationships and love in your life
- **Financial Well-Being**: effectively managing your economic life
- **Physical Well-Being**: having good health and enough energy to get things done on a daily basis
- **Community Well-Being**: the sense of engagement you have with the area where you live

### References


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The Five Essential Elements of Well-Being

In partnership with leading economists, psychologists, and other acclaimed scientists, Gallup has been exploring the common aspects of well-being that

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It is thought to be a cognitive limit to the number of friends we can maintain, not the number of people we know. People can boast thousands of 'friends' on Facebook, but Dunbar would say that it is impossible to feed and nourish all these relationships. ‘I have 293 friends on Facebook,’ says John, 36. Social networking sites such as Facebook have changed the landscape of friendship. It may be the case that the ease with which we can now remain in touch makes Dunbar’s number less relevant. There may well be limits to the number of people we can keep a quality friendship with, the type of friend we phone for advice and help. But it may be that we are able to maintain, at a lower level, additional friendships of a different quality far beyond this number. A compilation of the best books on social skills. Reviews books related to conversation, conflict resolution, body language, and more! Those were the books that opened my eyes to an aspect of social interaction that I had been totally missing. Those were the books that held a new insight for me each time I pulled them from the bookshelf. Those were the books that dramatically shaped and improved my understanding of social interaction. And those are the books that I’m going to share with you now. Level Up Your Social Life. Level Up Your Social Life is my newest book, and I think it’s some of my best writing yet. I wrote it to help people take practical steps towards a better social life. What are Social Needs. Figure 1. “A need is any condition within the person that is essential and necessary for life, growth and well-being. When needs are nurtured and satisfied, we live, grow, and thrive; when needs are neglected and thwarted, we are damaged, regress and suffer” (Reeve, 2009). It is important to recognise and understand basic needs as they are a commonality between all individuals that help us comprehend what drives human behaviour and motivates us to set and achieve tasks and goals in life.