

Mental health and social relationships

Mental illness has huge cost implications for society and the NHS in terms of lost work days and healthcare. Research into the health effect of social networks and interaction could inform cost-efficient mental health initiatives and policies.

Depression, anxiety and other psychological conditions cost the UK an estimated £77 billion a year. Experts predict that by 2020 depression will be second only to heart disease as an international health problem.

Social isolation has long been known as a key trigger for mental illness, while supportive relationships with friends, family and neighbours are beneficial to the mental health of individuals and the population. Other forms of social interaction such as volunteering are also known to boost wellbeing.

People with supportive friends and family generally have better mental and physical health than those who lack these networks. The same is true for those who take part in churches, clubs and voluntary organisations.

It is only by analysing people's lives over time within a structural, social and cultural context that we can establish whether social relationships really do contribute to better health and increased wellbeing – or whether better health and more energy in the first place enable people to invest in relationships with family and friends.

Researchers at the ESRC-funded International Centre for Lifecourse Studies In Society and Health have examined how social networks have a positive psychological impact.

Attachment theory suggests that people with secure childhoods may be better at relationships of any kind – for instance making friends at school and work, or getting on well with neighbours. This theory can only be tested by looking at information over the span of a person's life, preferably from birth to old age.

Key findings

- Adults with no friends are the worst off psychologically. There are significant health cost implications from the impact of this social isolation.
- The importance of friendships and family networks is not affected by education, employment or marital/cohabiting status.
- For women, regular contact with a large family network doesn't necessarily lead to a higher level of wellbeing. These networks can actually place more obligations and burdens on them. Instead, the research found that women's friendship networks are more important.
- However, men did better when they had a large number of friends or family members. Family networks don't seem to place the same burdens on men as on women.
- Volunteering is not as effective as a social network in protecting the psychological health of working-age people. It does not compensate for the loss of work relationships for people without jobs. However, volunteering was positive for the wellbeing of older people who had retired.
- Friendships appear to be important across many nations. A French study showed that having no social exchange with neighbours has a large negative impact on men's and women's quality of life. This found that people physically isolated from their friends who maintained wellbeing did so by establishing relationships with neighbours instead.

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Policy relevance and implications

A need exists for more interventions and policies that promote social relationships and psychological wellbeing. The policy actions which politicians should consider include:

- Providing financial support to volunteering and social enterprise groups. This will help older adults to participate more in social activities.
- Ensuring that planning policies include provision for public meeting places and green spaces for all. Public spaces such as parks need to be maintained so they encourage social networks. They need to be perceived as safe places to visit.
- Encouraging the development of neighbourhood projects. Small-scale funding to cover the running costs of community organisations and for hiring meeting places can have a major impact.
- Continuing to fund concessionary transport for senior citizens including bus and rail passes. Free or subsidised travel for older people enables them to maintain their social networks and reduce their risk of social isolation.
- Supporting parents during the early years of child development. Governments must continue to fund schemes such as Sure Start which are aimed at supporting parents of young children.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

This briefing is based on *Life Gets Under Your Skin*, which summarises work by the ESRC-funded International Centre for Lifecourse Studies In Society and Health (ICLS). The research on social networks looked at members of the 1958 birth cohort, which studies around 12,000 people from birth to the present day. It compared the mental health of those people who had large networks of friends and family to the health of those with smaller networks.

Paper: *Friends are equally important to men and women, but family matters more for men's wellbeing*
<http://jech.bmj.com/content/67/2/166.abstract>

Publication: *Life gets under your skin*
www.ucl.ac.uk/icls/publications/booklets

FURTHER INFORMATION

Professor Amanda Sacker; email: a.sacker@ucl.ac.uk

International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health (ICLS). Web: www.ucl.ac.uk/icls

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading agency for research funding and training in economic and social sciences. Web: www.esrc.ac.uk

Email the ESRC communications team:
comms@esrc.ac.uk

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