

February brings relationships into focus with both Valentine's Day and Family Day arriving this month. We all know about how eating right, exercising regularly and cutting back or avoiding alcohol improves our health and increases our lifespans. Did you know that good social relationships increase both our health span and lifespan even more significantly than sticking to Mediterranean Diet or quitting smoking? Research is supporting that we are 45% more likely to be alive in 5 years from now if we have a strong support network of friends and family. Diet and exercise increase life expectancy by 23-33%. By working on our social relationships, we increase our own health and the health of those we care about. Staying connected socially is more beneficial to health than diet or exercise.

If you are fortunate to be in a good marriage or have a good romantic partner, now is the time to celebrate Valentine's Day. Even the best of relationships have been under stress with all of this togetherness time...so see if you can't do something out of the ordinary this month. Maybe have a special dinner and get dressed up for the occasion. Perhaps you can put on some dancing music and dance or sing together. Or you could watch a special movie together, read to each other...any kind of special date that you and your partner enjoy will help beat the pandemic blues.

Not all of us have romantic partners. In terms of improving your wellness, strong friendships and community are a very close second to having a caring life partner. Loneliness can negatively affect both our mental health and physical health. Loneliness is certainly an offshoot of living through the pandemic and many of us are missing our friends and acquaintances. Making an effort to stay connected is very important to our health and wellbeing. We all feel lonely sometimes but for some of us, it is harder than others. Loneliness is a biological reaction to feeling cut off from social interaction. If you are feeling lonely, it is no different than feeling sad or angry or anxious, so start by recognizing there is no room for self blame if you are feeling lonely. But rather, try to see loneliness as an adaptive neuro-biological response to your current living conditions. There are things you can do to begin to feel less lonely.

One of the pitfalls of feeling lonely is that we tend to start with negative thoughts and perceiving social slights where none was intended. When someone does not pick up the phone, we assume that they don't want to talk to us, for example. More likely, they didn't hear the phone or thought the call was a telemarketer or they were in the shower...or who knows what? On top of feeling unlovable and misreading things, the more lonely we feel, the more likely we will struggle with reaching out to others. It can become a downward spiral. If you are feeling overwhelmed with loneliness, here is a trick...warm yourself up physically...take a long hot shower or bath or warm your hands as you savour a hot cup of tea or coffee. Warming up physically soothes loneliness. Then call, text or email a friend or family member for a chat. Holding up a conversation is a challenge right now so if you have nothing much to talk about, ask for a recipe, an address, a recommendation for a good book to read...a show to watch...ask about how the person you are communicating with is doing and when wrapping up the call, set up another time to connect.

There is an adage that making friends is easier when you are a child and the friends you made in high school are the ones you will have for life. I am not sure that's true. There is an art to making new friends and it takes some time and effort. Here is a great link to learn more about making new friends as an adult. <https://www.raptitude.com/2021/01/how-to-make-friends-as-an-adult/> For much more information on how enhancing our social relationships improves our health and mental wellness, you might enjoy reading *Growing Young* by Marta Zaraska (2020).

We are lucky to be a part of Port Perry PROBUS because it helps us stay connected to others who want to socialize. We have a pool of 320 or so acquaintances who have friend making potential. Look over what activities are offered, reconnect with some people you already know. And give yourself permission to start making some new friends –you deserve them and they deserve your friendship too.