

Connectedness and Health

UC Berkeley Wellness Letter, December 2010

We all know the value of friends, family and other social relationships. Not only do they add immensely to our quality of life, research has shown that they also tend to add years to our



lives. This was clearly seen in a recent review from Brigham Young University in Utah, which looked at 148 studies involving more than 300,000 people. It linked stronger social relations with a 50% increased chance of survival, on average, over the course of the studies. And the effect was consistent across a number of factors, such as age, sex, and health status.

Most health organizations don't recognize lack of social relations as a risk factor for mortality. For one thing, the term is seen as fuzzy – there are

many different kinds of relationships and social networks, and they aren't always good. Moreover, it's not clear how social relations affect health. One theory is that social support "buffers" against stress – that is, provides emotional and tangible resources to help us deal with adverse events and illness, according to the Brigham Young researchers. Family and friends may also encourage us, directly or indirectly, to take better care of ourselves. And being part of a social network often gives us meaningful roles that boost self-esteem and purpose of life, which in turn can improve health. "We take relationships for granted – we're like fish that don't notice the water," said Timothy Smith, one of the researchers.