

Rx: Hugs & a Little Help from Our Friends

By Donna Daisy, Ph.D.

One recent morning while walking my dog, Abby, I was so engrossed in my own concerns about my husband's health problems that I hardly noticed as my neighbor, Sylvia, approached us. I've always admired this vivacious, mentally sharp 94-year-old woman. But today, her pace was slower and her shoulders seemed to sag with the weight of her concerns. Sylvia had just lost her best friend of so years to cancer. As she approached us, the eyes that met mine were filled with sadness.



I opened my arms, and we stood in a silent embrace for a very long time. Words weren't necessary. I was sharing something more important with my friends, and I was wishing to share something more powerful as I sat there that morning. I felt a great joy and contentment more than I had ever experienced.

As a whole, we have made tremendous gains in our understanding of the importance of having warm, supportive people in our lives. We have learned that having a strong network of friends and family is a key to good health. As we grow older, it's easy to experience the isolation that comes with age, but research shows that these experiences apparently tap into something that researchers are starting to take very seriously: the medical value of healthy relationships. Stress studies involving more than thirty-seven thousand people show that social isolation, the sense that you have nobody with whom you can share your private feelings or have close contact, doubles the chances of dying from heart disease, stroke, or cancer. In other words, having a strong network of friends and family is a key to good health. Social support means knowing you can count on others for help when you need it. Research by others in the field of social support, sums up his results by saying that "the mandate to love your neighbor as you love yourself is not just a moral mandate. It is a physiological mandate. Caring is biological. One thing you get from caring for others is that you are not lonely; and the more connected you are to life, the healthier you are."

The bottom line is that we now know that good health is associated with having meaningful relationships and a sense of community. We can all benefit from these studies by finding ways to value and strengthen our social support networks. We can all experience the power of having friends, wanting to spend time together, being involved in each others lives, and supporting each other in good times and bad.

I'm personally grateful, probably healthier, and very fortunate to be a part of a community with these values.

CIRCLE OF SUPPORT