

Opinion: How friends affect your health

By Pete Bissonette

How many friends do you have?

If your doctor isn't asking now, they may start soon.

According to researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, your social circles are as important to your health as diet and exercise.

Researchers evaluated data from four U.S. population surveys from adolescence into old age spanning three dimensions of social relationships: social integration, social support, and social strain. They then compared the social relationships to blood pressure, waist circumference, body mass index, and systematic inflammation—four key markers for mortality risk.

The team's results, published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, not only back up past research directly linking social circles to longer life in old age, they also show a healthful impact during early and middle adulthood.

For example, the study shows that social isolation in young adulthood increases inflammation risk as much as physical inactivity.

In old age, the researchers say social isolation is more damaging than diabetes in controlling hypertension.

In middle adulthood, the strength of social connections—not the size of the social network—was a greater factor to health. Contrary to younger and older adults, the quality of social relationships matters over quantity, explains sociology professor Kathleen Mullan Harris.

“Based on these findings, it should be as important to encourage adolescents and young adults to build social relationships and social skills for interacting with others as it is to eat healthy and be physically active,” Harris says in the study.

Having the charisma to attract a large social circle doesn't always come naturally. To embody the attractive mannerisms and cool and reserved energy of a magnetic personality, try this exercise from our Instantaneous Personal Magnetism Paraliminal at your next holiday gathering:

Think of a person with strong magnetic qualities. The person could be any man or woman you know or have seen on TV or in the movies, or perhaps an imagined person. Consider what characteristics of this person you would most like to emulate and instill as a habit.

Next, enter a heightened awareness of yourself, focusing especially on the relaxed stillness of your facial and body muscles.

Now imagine yourself and the role model you selected in front of you. Notice posture, clothing, walking, talking, and the qualities of voice and physical movements. Notice the dynamic magnetic qualities of the role model and your own detracting behaviors. Imagine shoring up the leakages of your energy by establishing new habits of living that foster the magnetic qualities.

When the image of you is right, affirm it as a choice and step into it.

Fully experience through all your senses the new characteristics you have selected. Project yourself into a near future situation in which you rehearse how well you demonstrate the qualities you have gained.

Do this exercise any time you're about to enter a social

situation. Although a dramatic change may be short-lived at first, your body and mind will get the message, and your magnetic personality will blossom in time.

Pete Bissonette has been the president of Learning Strategies for more than 30 years. The company develops, publishes, and supports programs to help people maximize their potential through personal learning courses and live events.