

What are the benefits of making new social connections?

Background

Intimate relationships play an important role in shaping an individual's health, wellbeing, and happiness (Holt-Lunstad, [2021](#); Holt-Lunstad et, [2015](#); Fowler & Christaki, [2008](#)). It is hypothesized that this effect may be due to the stress-buffering effect of social support (Cohen & Willis, [1985](#)). While long term kin and kith relationships provide critical reservoirs of support (Hobfoll et al., [1990](#)), the benefits of new social connections are less explored. Understanding these benefits is important to motivating social connections. This is particularly important given that individuals likely employ some form of psychological cost-benefit assessment before choosing whether and how to engage with others in social settings (Ahmad et al., [2022](#)).

Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to examine the benefits of new and emerging social relationships. We examine the various contexts in which building new relationships are beneficial, how churn within the personal networks of individuals and relationship breakdowns necessitate the need for refreshing one's social network with new social ties, and the relative costs and benefits of building new relationships.

Evidence from Existing Studies

According to Aron's ([1986](#)) self-expansion model of close relationships, human beings seek to expand their sense of self across their entire lives and a key way they accomplish this is through building new and different types of relationships. Several studies demonstrate that building new relationships contributes to improvements in wellbeing (Klaiber et al. [2018](#); de Janasz & Forret, [2008](#); Chichester, [2014](#)). For example, Cornwell & Laumann ([2015](#)) showed that increases in network size are associated with a reduction in depressive symptoms and improved functional health. Further, Klaiber et al. ([2018](#)) showed that in older adults, new relationships increased perceived social support healthier lifestyles (e.g.).

Given the ebb, flow, and deterioration of relationships, individuals must actively make new connections in order to maintain one's social network (Roy et al., [2022](#); Wellman et al., [1997](#)). The churn of relationships may provide one mechanism by which new social connections benefit individuals. This is exemplified in studies by Roddick et al. ([2021](#)), which found that increases in one's social network size in the three-months following a move to a new city was associated with better cardiovascular health. Similar studies highlight these effects among migrants and refugees (Aran et al., [2022](#)). For example, Mao & Zhao ([2012](#)) highlight weak social cohesion, during the stage of forming new connections, as a key contributor to depression for immigrant populations. Taken together, these studies suggest that a key benefit of meeting new people is their contribution to one's social network.

The benefits of new ties also go above and beyond their contribution to one's inner circle of close friends. Indeed, research focused on so called "weak ties" illustrates that new relationships have unique benefits when compared to more established relationships (Collins et al., [2022](#)). This is because new relationships are characteristically different from established ones – the latter of which may be entrenched in norms that allow for relatively less flexibility (Thibaut & Kelley, [1959](#)). For example, new relationships may offer greater opportunity to fulfill previously unmet social needs, practice social interactions that build confidence, or gain fresh perspectives and insights from others. Illustrating these benefits, studies have shown that networking is key to career success (de Janasz & Forret, [2008](#); Chichester, [2014](#)) and talking to strangers has immediate benefits for individuals (Attir et al, [2022](#); Schroeder et al, [2022](#); Sandstrom et al, [2022](#)).

Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

To examine the benefits of meeting new people, we used data from the 2022 Canadian Social Connection Survey, which asked a subset of participants directly about the perceived benefits of meeting new people. Results showed that among 615 participants, only 8.3% of participants said they did not think there was any benefits to meeting new people and the average participant identified at least 3.1 benefits (sd = 2.6). Meanwhile, 55.3% said it helped them consider new perspectives, 36.6% said it improved their mood, 36.4% said it helps them build a stronger social network, 32.8% said it helped them feel less lonely, 30.7% said it gives them an opportunity to provide to support someone else, 29.9% said it made them happier, 27.5% said it improved their attitude, 24% said that it provided them an outlet to talk about important things, and 16.5% said it helps them build a stronger professional network. Furthermore, among 585 respondents, 53.7% said that the ideal frequency of meeting new people was at least every few months.

When examining how frequently people actually reported making new friends, 14.6% of respondents in our longitudinal sub-cohort (n = 467) reported making a new friend in the past month – highlighting the high degree to which people's relationship and social networks evolve and change even in relatively short time periods (Karnstedt, [2010](#); Bhardwaj et al, [2016](#)). In the larger 2021 cross sectional survey (n = 3304), increased frequency of meeting new people was associated with higher subjective happiness scores ($\beta = 0.10$ p < 0.05), even after controlling for age, gender, and household income. Similarly, when looking at data from the 2022 Canadian Social Connection Survey (n=3193), we found that people who were dissatisfied with the number of friends they had were significantly less happy ($\beta = -0.49$, p-value =<0.05) compared to those who were satisfied – highlighting the importance of maintaining a healthy social relationship.

Of course, we also observed that many participants experienced barriers to meeting new people. For example, in the 2022 Canadian Social Connection Survey Sub-cohort (n=543), 13.4% said they are afraid of rejection, 7.7% selected "I'm afraid people won't agree with my worldview", 17.4% noted they feel it's hard to have an authentic connection with others, and lastly 21.8% selected "I cannot afford to go out with people". These barriers reflect the real challenges that people may experience to meeting new people and building new relationships.



Discussion

The evidence summarized above underscores the importance of meeting new people to the health, wellbeing, and happiness of individuals. For newcomers and other populations establishing new roots, social integration (which itself is conditional on building new social ties) in particular is important for health and wellbeing. Even for those with somewhat more stable social networks, normal churn and dissolution of friendship requires ongoing relationship building to ensure the health of one's social network. While there are some risks associated with reaching out and building these new relationships, there are many ways to minimize the effort and risk required to connect with others. Networking through friends and colleagues can support the development of both strong and weak ties – thereby providing essential sources of social support and social capital (Blake et al.; [2019](#)). Nevertheless, people recognize the psychological and physiological demand of building relationships and have some hesitancy in their capacity or ability to meet new people. More research is needed to understand these challenges and how to overcome them – particularly with consideration to situations in which individuals must rebuild their social networks after significant life changes.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence from existing studies and the analyses of data from the Canadian Social Connections Survey in 2021 and 2022, we recommend policies and programs that help individuals meet new people. This includes programs that help ensure the integration of members of the community, the inclusion of minority groups (including newcomers), as well as those that help individuals develop the social self-efficacy and capacity to start new relationships.

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