

Loneliness as harmful to teenagers' health as not exercising enough, study finds

By Meredith Griffiths



A person's relationship with other people helps to buffer many of the daily stressors that people experience each day.

New research at the University of North Carolina has found that being lonely is as harmful to teenagers' health as not getting enough exercise.

There have been many studies showing the health effects of social isolation on the elderly, but this is the first to look at the impact on the young.

The researchers at UNC said their findings demonstrated that it was as important to encourage young people to build social skills as it was to tell them to eat well and exercise.

Key points:

- Important for teenagers to develop social skills, research finds
- The link between social isolation and health continues throughout life
- Between the ages of about 18 and 50 it was the quality of relationships that mattered more than the quantity

The researchers looked at how connected and involved the teenagers were with their family, friends, school and neighbourhood.

Professor Kathleen Mullan Harris, a professor of sociology at UNC, said those with fewer social connections were at higher risk of inflammation or abdominal obesity.

"The reason that we chose these [health issues], all of them are highly related to important diseases that will come along later in life; including heart disease, stroke, cancer, immune function."

The researchers monitored physical activity and discovered that whether lonely teenagers exercised or not they still had poor health outcomes.

She said the researchers concluded that a person's relationship with other people helped to buffer many of the daily stressors that people experienced each day.

"So when you're socially isolated you don't have that advantage and then your body feels sort of the full impact of the daily stressors that we confront every day."

'Does not mean everyone needs to be outgoing'

Professor Mullan Harris said she was an extremely shy child and probably only had one really close friend, but she was active in her school and involved in a number of activities.

"And I was very close to my parents, we did a lot of family activities.

"So it'd be a pretty rare individual who isn't close at all to their parents or has few friends and doesn't really do much in the community."

She said the link between social isolation and health continues throughout life.

The researchers used other data sets to look at middle aged and older people and found between the ages of about 18 to about 50 it was the quality of relationships that mattered more than the quantity.

"In middle adulthood adults are just naturally embedded in many different social networks.

"They likely have children, they likely have parents who are alive and they're dealing with those two generations.

"They have people, they're embedded in social networks at work.

"And so it's just not voluntary that middle adults are in all these social networks.

"So it's not really the quantity that matters, it's really what those connections mean to their lives."

However, as people aged the research found the sheer number of relationships people had mattered for their health.

Source; <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-01-06/study-finds-teenagers-loneliness-bad-for-their-health/7070376>