

Interacting with others

Ongoing research continues to confirm the importance of social relationships to our own longevity – the rest of our life.

Society and longevity

The past two centuries have seen the remarkable growth of the life expectancy of a baby from less than 40 years to over 80 years.

The industrial revolution was really kicking in over this time and changing everything – including longevity. Most people see increasing longevity as a health and medical success story. It is, but it has relied on how our societies have developed. We now know our gene pool has not changed much over the past thousands of years, so natural evolution has contributed little.

Longevity increased as our society matured to grow infrastructure (such as roads, sewers, hospitals) and build capabilities such as education, laws and information sharing.

Increasing longevity meant we benefitted from more sharing of wisdom - to further increase longevity. It's as if we have pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

It's now clear that individuals can affect their own longevity by how they relate to others.

Personal implications

Our lives are connected through our social relationships. A lack of social connections greatly increases the odds of death.

A recent large study shows that the impact of social connectivity is of the same order as smoking, obesity and the lack of physical activity¹. How can we use this information?

Start by looking at the breadth of our contacts with family, friends and others we interact with and rely on. The wider and more balanced the better.

How deep is each relationship?

- How well do your contacts understand you?
- Can you rely on them?
- Can you open up to them?

What strains the relationship?

- Do they criticise you?
- Do they let you down?
- Do they get on your nerves?

As well as thinking through these questions in assessing others, we would do well to take a closer look at ourselves.

We can try to improve in all these areas. There is no 'right' combination. Each of us is different and our choices will vary with our situation and our willingness to act.

The quality of our relationships can significantly impact our longevity. It's worth ensuring they are in good shape.

And since what we do to influence our longevity will also affect our quality of life, there is a lot of incentive to take action.

¹ *Social Relationships and physiological determinants of longevity across the human life span.* Yang et al. [Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A](#). 2016 Jan 19;113(3):578-83