Social Relationships

Social relationships play a significant role in longevity. Relationships with friends and with family play varying roles and operate differently for men and women.

**Strong social networks with friends** assist longer survival, as demonstrated by a wide range of recently published studies. Friends may directly influence health behaviours such as smoking, alcohol consumption, exercise, depression, self-esteem, coping and morale

Social isolation is accompanied by lower longevity, especially for men living alone. Older men seem to benefit more from participation in organisations. This may reflect their typically longer paid work experience providing a more ‘natural’ social environment – and is also consistent with the greater problems associated with their retirement from paid work.

Very close relationships (where people genuinely confide in each other) can significantly improve longevity and can also reduce the likelihood of moving to residential care. Not surprisingly, for couples their partner is the main confidant. However, women also confide in daughters and friends much more than do their male partners. Married men have a much higher longevity than their unmarried counterparts

**Strong social networks with family** appear to be more protective against disability than they are in assisting survival although there is some suggestion that men may benefit on both counts.

**Conclusions**

There are compelling reasons for older people in particular to maintain and enhance their social networks as much as possible. Aiming to maximise the quality of relationships with both family and friends should underpin the potential for benefits of additional longevity accompanied by a lower level of disability.

Women tend to be more diversified in their networks and appear to benefit accordingly. Their challenge may be to maintain this diversity in older age.

Men appear to be more reliant than women on structure (organisations) and family (spouse) for healthy ageing. A particular focus on broadening and deepening their base of relationships would be a healthy goal.

**Sources**


