

Building Relationships Builds Better Communities

~By Essie Calhoun-McDavid

Are we each responsible for our own health? Personally, I believe we each have some responsibility for the overall health of our community. "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irresistible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick," says Brené Brown, Professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work.

There is clinical evidence to support her point. For example, several years ago researchers at Brigham Young University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill looked at data from 148 studies on health outcomes and social relationships including more than 300,000 men and women across the developed world. What they found was that people with poor social connections had on average 50% higher odds of death in the study's follow-up period (an average of 7.5 years) than people with more robust social ties. Another study showed that adults who had a doctor's visit and were accompanied by a friend or family member showed a lower increase in blood pressure. Other research found that people with more social connections and a wider variety of social networks were less likely to develop a colds than more socially isolated people.

All of this suggests to me that on a personal level, I can do more to improve my health and the health of my community. How do I reach out to people? I don't need to jump into my car and search for new connections. There are naturally occurring relationships all around me. I can accompany an older member of my church to her doctor's appointment. I can spend a few minutes playing Frisbee with the child next door and listening to how his day went. When I see a neighbor walking her dog I might offer to join her and enjoy a casual conversation. I can write, text or email and send a joke, a prayer, or an interesting story to someone I haven't seen in a while to maintain our connection. I can spend a few minutes with a neighbor who lives alone listening and learning about what makes him a special individual.

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Relationships have always mattered, but our changing society has made it challenging to make meaningful connections. People labor longer hours or work two jobs to meet rising costs. One parent may be raising children alone with little time left for friendships. People are more mobile and move often. Technology invites us to stay in the house and play computer games or watch almost endless choices on TV. We text rather than talk. Many areas don't have street lights or sidewalks or may be unsafe so we are less inclined to walk through our neighborhoods. All of these factors can be used as an excuse for isolation or they can motivate us to try a little harder to connect. Regardless of where we live, we would do well to make the extra effort to reach out to one another. We will all be the healthier for it.

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