

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

STAYING CONNECTED TO LIVE LONGER

"Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I want to be until you are what you want to be. This is the inner-related structure of reality." Dr Martin Luther King's words of wisdom highlight an essential truth that no person is an island. We all depend upon and need the support, encouragement, and nurturing of others. The importance of 'staying connected' to family, friends, and the greater community cannot be stressed enough. Think about the birds on the telephone wire - you rarely see a single bird on a wire. From the days of the barn raising, people have always needed the support of others. It doesn't take a scientific study to show that surrounding yourself with supportive friends and families can have a positive effect on your emotional and physical well-being, but there is a lot of research to confirm it.

Research from the University of Michigan has shown that spending just 10 minutes talking to another person can improve your memory and your performance on tests. In that study, socializing was just as effective as more traditional terms of mental exercise in boosting memory and intelligence performance. Staying connected can even save your life. A Yale study showed that lack of emotional support before admission was a strong predictor of fatal and nonfatal cardiovascular events the year after admission for elderly patients hospitalized with clinical heart failure. Other studies are now showing that social connections have a huge influence on both our physical and mental well-being. One study showed that the number and diversity of social relationships was found to be important to one's susceptibility to colds and flu. Those who had three or fewer relationships were four times more likely to catch a cold than were persons with six or more relationships.

Staying connected is important at all times in our life; but even more important when we are faced with life's challenges such as a serious illness, death of loved ones or aging. A person diagnosed with a potentially serious illness may experience a sense of separateness from others, which can lead to isolation. Of course, this is the exact opposite of what anyone dealing with an illness needs. Fortunately, there are many support groups in the community, either facilitated by a professional or a lay person, to help folks with major illnesses work through their fears regarding their illness with others who have experienced the same illness. Everyone has right to feel secure and supported while working through feelings and reactions, and it is nearly always easier and more effective not to do this alone.

As we become older, we may experience many life changes often within a short period of time. Stresses such as changing our residence, and loss of social supports due to retirement and death of friends and loved ones, may cause feelings of loss, anxiety, or grief. These feelings may lead to withdrawal from usual activities and isolation from others; and loss of the will to stay connected. It has been shown that isolation can have a significant impact on an older person's longevity. Studies have shown that there is a connection between social isolation and risk of mortality or physical illness in the elderly. In other words, if you are elderly and isolated, you have a greater risk of dying before your time.

Caring for an older relative or a family member with a serious illness can also generate feelings of anxiety, loneliness and isolation. The caregiver expends a lot of physical, mental, spiritual, and

emotional energy to care for a loved one. Keep in mind my basic philosophy of life: *You cannot like, love, and take care of others; until you like, love, and take care of yourself.* It is important for the caregiver to stay connected. Interacting with friends and others outside the family provides a break from the stress of care giving; and allows the caregiver to share their fears with someone who will not judge them. Distance from a stressful situation, even if just for a few hours, can do wonders in boosting your emotional strength.

Maintaining support and connectedness is also extremely important for people who are fighting addictions. Maintaining sobriety for alcoholics and drug addicts is extremely difficult, and almost impossible to do in isolation. The importance of a 'support group' for recovery cannot be minimized; although some people in recovery often think it is a sign of weakness to seek out support when they are trying to develop a recovery program. Seeking support has nothing to do with weakness. In fact, being around supportive people is a natural human need, necessary for happiness. Research has shown that being around supportive people actually increases a chemical in your brain called serotonin, which is the chemical in the brain that eases depression. When you have serotonin flowing, you feel better. Being around supportive people can also help us stick to our recovery program, whether recovery from alcohol or food additions. People who are on a diet have a greater chance of long-term success if they surround themselves with folks who were going through the same thing. This is why a support group such as Weight Watchers is very popular for people trying to maintain their weight.

We all need to feel supported and connected to others no matter what our age or situation. Remember that you are not alone. Do not be afraid to reach out and ask for help. There are many support groups in the community not only for those fighting addictions but also for different life crises; and there are specific things you can do to help stay connected in this very chaotic world. Make telephone calls to old friends and family members. Schedule more trips to visit friends and family members, and make sure to take your children, either young or adult, with you. Visit people in a nursing home, who may not have any family. Join clubs in your community; or just read the AMRA newspaper! For those times when you feel too overwhelmed, maintain connection and seek support by calling one of the many hot lines, such as: the Alzheimer's education and referral center 800:438-4380; the National Mental Health Association 800:969-6642; and the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 800:273-8255.

Mark Twain said "*whoever is happy will make others happy, too.*" The most important thing to remember is that in order seek relationships and to stay connected, we need to put ourselves in social situations. Meeting people does take effort, and the effort is worth it. So go ahead, step outside of your comfort zone and get involved. It could add years to your life, and even make those years happier ones.

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