

Social connection and resilience

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Social connection is the key to a happy life. People who have strong and authentic relationships with a range of people around them are happier, more fulfilled and tend to live longer with fewer health problems. But how do we know this?

The longest running study on life satisfaction tells us so. In 1938, researchers at Harvard University began a study that has continued to this day. The study's main goal was to find out what conditions make people happy. They followed several hundred participants from different backgrounds through each stage of their lives. They tracked a range of life circumstances, including relationships, employment, financial status and asked participants to report how satisfied they were in their lives.

What the researchers found was clear. Whether you grew up in poverty or came from a privileged background, the key to a happy, healthy and fulfilling life is connection to others.¹

We are wired for social connection

The findings of the study make perfect sense when you think about how we evolved. Our brains, bodies and emotions were shaped over many thousands of years living in small tribal groups in hostile environments. For our ancient ancestors, social isolation from the tribe meant almost certain death from hunger or the threat of predators. Our survival depended on forming long-lasting social bonds.

Research shows how people with low social support are less tolerant to stress. When people feel that no one has their back, they are much more vigilant, with a higher resting heart rate and higher concentrations of stress hormones.^{2,3} Furthermore, threats to social connection, such as rejection and isolation, can activate many of the same neurobiological systems associated with physical threats and fear, demonstrating how social connection is deeply tied to our sense of safety.⁴

If having good social connections is tied to greater emotional and physical wellbeing, it's not surprising that social relationships are also important when

it comes to resilience, because they help to reduce stress and suffering in a number of ways.

Social connection and first responder resilience

There's extensive evidence of the relationship between social support, mental health and resilience among first responders.⁵ The Beyond Blue national survey of the mental health and wellbeing of first responders in Australia found that social support had the strongest relationship to resilience. While the researchers found that resilience could be eroded by operational trauma, they concluded that the negative effects of trauma could be mitigated by positive social factors.⁶

In other studies, researchers found that a sense of belonging among first responders was associated with lower distress and protected them against developing post traumatic stress disorder after trauma.^{7,8,9}





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How social connection increases resilience

Resilience is a complex thing, but researchers generally agree that it involves our capacity to cope when things get tough and bounce back from challenges in an adaptive way. It is our ability to bend and not break under stress. But most definitions of resilience focus on the individual and fail to acknowledge how individuals are embedded in social networks. These networks can be more or less resilient in their own right, but also support the individual's ability to adapt to challenges.

Physiological responses to stress

The effects of social connection are reflected in how our bodies respond to stress. Whenever we perceive a threat, which can be anything from physical danger to social embarrassment to financial trouble, our nervous system springs into action, setting off a cascade of bodily reactions. These fight-or-flight reactions, although designed to help us respond to danger, are often uncomfortable and part of what we experience as stress. Furthermore, regular exposure to stressors, which is common for first responders, can lead to overactivation of the fight-or-flight response and imbalances in the stress system. These can undermine resilience and cause chronic physical and mental health problems like weakened immunity, digestive complaints, burnout or mood and anxiety disorders.

Social connection helps to tamp down the stress response. When we feel that we have social support, we are physiologically much more at ease. The presence of supportive others during stressful events (sometimes even just in our minds or over a radio), along with specific things like eye contact and warm touch, activates the release of oxytocin, a hormone that evokes a physically felt sense of reassurance and contentment and is a direct antidote to the stress hormone cortisol.¹⁰ So, our social connections help us to recover from stress more quickly and effectively while also providing some protection against the wear and tear on our minds and bodies that comes from regular exposure to stressful events.¹¹

Social networks as a 'container'

Social connection acts like a container for stress during challenging times. With good social support, we perceive challenging events as less threatening. Strong communities naturally lean on each other in times of need. This was demonstrated in the New South Wales Bega Valley community's response to the summer bushfires in 2019–20, which saw 4 lives lost and 467 homes destroyed across the shire. The strength of the community was summed up in a poem by a student at Tathra Public School who said that 'through all the horror and fright, the community had pulled together tight'.¹²

Social safety nets are exemplified for first responders in the all-important 'backup'; being able to rely on your colleagues

to be there for you in a crisis is crucial. But equally important for resilience is the mateship and comradeship in first responder teams. Beyond Blue researchers found that team cohesion was one of the most important workplace characteristics linked to resilience in first responders.¹³

Our social container reduces feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. Though it may seem counterintuitive, having strong social support can actually improve our ability to cope with problems on our own, by increasing our self-esteem and sense of control and mastery. Furthermore, a reliable social network isn't just useful in emergency situations. Strong relationships with friends and family can also bolster our mood, improve flexibility and motivate us to adopt healthy rather than risky coping behaviours.¹⁴

Social connection is linked to purpose

If something feels futile or pointless, it is much more likely to wear us down. But if we have a clear mission based on shared values, the sense of purpose this creates changes how we think about challenges. Purpose makes things that are onerous a little more bearable. The mundane job of protecting a crime scene, the gruelling job of keeping a patient stable during a rescue operation, the relentlessly exhausting marathon of a bushfire or flood—our experience of these things can be improved when we have a sense that they matter.

Social connection increases our sense of purpose.^{15, 16} Many first responders are driven by a sense of duty and service to the community and studies have shown how helping others has benefits for the giver as well as the receiver.¹⁷

Collective resilience and social preparedness for disasters

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on how the psychological preparedness of emergency responders increases their resilience. However, with the scale of recent disasters and their community effects, the importance of social preparedness is now being recognised. This becomes apparent during emergencies and disasters when people who are part of well-prepared communities or organisations tend to do better than those who are not connected to any community support.¹⁸ Social preparedness involves fostering a sense of collective responsibility and building strong social networks that can support response and recovery efforts.

There are limits to individual resilience. Collective resilience accounts for the natural differences in capacity, where members of the community shoulder each other, support those who are struggling and reach in when one member is knocked down. This is more effective and reliable than expecting the individual to be able to resist falling or getting up on their own.

By focusing on social preparedness, whole communities can enhance their resilience and ability to recover from disasters by leveraging the strengths of their social connections, support systems and collective resources.¹⁹

Why focus on promoting social connection?

Resilience programs tend to focus on individual skills and capacities. But how resilient we are may have more to do with our networks of connection and support than it does with our personal strengths. Social connection could have the greatest potential to reduce risk to individuals and families, especially in the face of collective trauma.²⁰ To protect and enhance resilience in the first responder community, we want to go beyond focusing on personal strengths and overcoming challenges to creating opportunities to strengthen the important container of social networks.

It is possible to develop programs that harness the natural building blocks of resilience that evolved when we lived in small tribal groups. Programs are not just inclusive of families, but family-focused. Such programs shouldn't differentiate between 'work' and 'home' stress. They should improve the wellbeing and resilience of every member in the family as well as the unit as a whole. Resilience programs can foster a whole-of-community approach to first responder wellbeing and engage not just first responder families but the communities in which they are embedded through events like Thank a First Responder Day. This promotes resilience and social preparedness by strengthening relationships and networks that assist in recovery from large-scale challenges.

There are also wellbeing activities that target the modifiable determinants of wellbeing. These are controllable things that we can build into our lifestyle that are proven to increase wellbeing and social connection is the biggest.²¹ In this sense, having fun and enjoying quality time with others is just as valuable to wellbeing as exercise and learning to meditate. The key is getting the right dose that counterbalances the stress inherent in first responder work.

The model of care that Fortem Australia uses differs from traditional mental health services as it emphasises supporting participants to make early and accessible investments in their wellbeing. It focuses on building resilience and facilitating early intervention rather than solely responding to ill-health. The social connection activities used are proving to be a powerful conduit for early intervention, where 17% of those who accessed the psychology support first connected with Fortem through a wellbeing activity. That's 17% who may not have otherwise accessed needed support or waited until their problems became bigger. By providing a simple, non-threatening and achievable experience of looking after mental health and wellbeing, we are also building a trusting relationship with a comprehensive mental health support service so they know where to turn and are more willing to put their hand up when help is needed.

While social connection activities facilitate prevention of mental ill-health through lifestyle factors that enhance resilience, they can also facilitate early intervention when a more targeted level of support is needed, both of which can contribute to sustainability in the first responder workforce.

Like other types of fitness, resilience is something we can develop by investing in regular, quality time with family, friends and workmates. These are as important to mental health as getting the right balance of nutrition is for physical health.

Conclusion

Social connection means having people around you that you feel are part of your life and you feel part of theirs. It involves a sense of belonging, of being part of something bigger than you, a sense of ‘we-ness’ rather than ‘me-ness’. It involves having people that you can share your joy with and who you can turn to for support when you’re in trouble, whether that’s someone to talk to, someone to hold you or someone to give you a helping hand when you need it.

We are not made to survive alone. We are wired for connection and this is crucial for individual and collective wellbeing as the first responder community continues to face emergencies and disasters.

Endnotes

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