

MY LONGEVITY

Longevity and Social Relationships

At this time of year, we often look to review existing relationships. Ongoing research continues to confirm the importance of social relationships to our own longevity – the rest of our life. Previous articles have explained how we know this and what we can do about it.

Society and longevity

The maturing of social structures in many countries over the past two centuries has underpinned 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 what enabled us to take advantage is how we have developed socially. Our gene pool has changed very little over the past thousands of years and yet the average baby is now living a lifespan that has more than doubled.

Longevity has increased as our society has matured to facilitate growth in infrastructure (such as roads, sewers, hospitals) and in capabilities such as education, laws and information sharing.

Increasing longevity has enhanced the sharing of wisdom and facilities - to further increase community longevity. It's as if we have been pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

The increasing weight of evidence suggests that we can also have a major impact on our own longevity by what we do. Our own relationships play an important role.

Personal implications

Our lives are connected through our social relationships. A lack of social connectivity greatly increases the odds of death. One recent large study suggests that social connectivity has a potential impact of the same order as smoking, obesity and the lack of physical activity¹. What is 'social connectivity' in this study and how can we use this information?

- A key element is the breadth of our social contacts - with family, friends and others with which we interact and on whom we may rely. The wider and more balanced the better.
- The depth of relationship matters – 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.

We can respond to all of these. There is no 'right' combination – we are each different and tend to become more so as we age- but we can use our own judgment.

However, this information can help shape our lives. Knowing that the quality of our social relationships can significantly impact our longevity is a step forward. Since what we do to influence our longevity is also likely to affect our quality of life, there is some incentive to take action.

For all our readers we hope that the New Year will be fruitful and that these reflections on social relationships lead to further benefits from managing your longevity – the rest of your life.

David Williams

December 2017

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