- Socialization



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Social science

Social connection is essential to our long-term health – in fact, it may just save your life. So, how can we prioritise and improve on it? Science writer David Robson has a few ideas...

BY NATASHA LUNN

Have you ever had a slightly stilted conversation at the school gates and worried afterwards that the other parent thinks you're boring? Or met a new work colleague and suspected they didn't like you for some reason? Perhaps you've even felt a sense of uneasiness in an older friendship, and decided it'd be easier to avoid messaging than to forgive each other's flaws. According to science writer David Robson, who specialises in psychology and neuroscience, these are just a few of the judgement errors that cause barriers to connection. In his new book, *The Laws Of Connection*, he hopes to help us overcome them.

David's mission is personal as well as public: as a teenager and in his 20s, he had "really bad social anxiety". Indeed, sometimes at academic conferences, he'd hide in the toilets during coffee breaks to avoid the awkwardness of a conversation with a stranger. ►

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It wasn't until he began researching social connection that he realised it's possible to practise your way out of these feelings (and that many of us share them).

But the findings he details in his book, which set out 13 strategies for better socialising, aren't only relevant for the shyer ones among us. However socially confident you may feel, David reveals that it's likely there are biases preventing you from connecting more deeply. He also stacks up the research to show how vital social interaction is for our health – not just mentally, but also physically. Put together, it's a fresh reminder of what most of us know but too quickly forget: there are few things more important in this life than how we forge ties to other humans. Here, David shares some of the lessons he's learnt from his work.

CREATE A SHARED REALITY

One study found that small talk by itself wasn't such a great predictor of wellness, compared with conversations that involve the exchange of something meaningful. Mostly, it's the absence of a close emotional bond with the people around us that leaves us feeling disconnected and isolated, rather than a mere lack of social opportunities.

According to a new theory, a deep sense of connection comes from constructing a 'shared reality' with another person. Put simply, this is the knowledge that another person understands us, has the same visceral feelings and experiences the world in the same way. When this happens, two people's neural activity begins to synchronise; their interactions flow more smoothly; they feel greater trust and affection and their stress levels plummet. When we lack a shared reality with the people around us, however, we feel literally alienated – as if we're a foreign visitor speaking an entirely different language.

Remember, it works both ways

In a social situation, you're not the only person who matters. If there's a moment of awkwardness in a conversation, it can be helpful to remember that it's the other person's responsibility as much as yours. It's also natural – we can't always say sparkling, witty things in every sentence. And people are very forgiving of that.

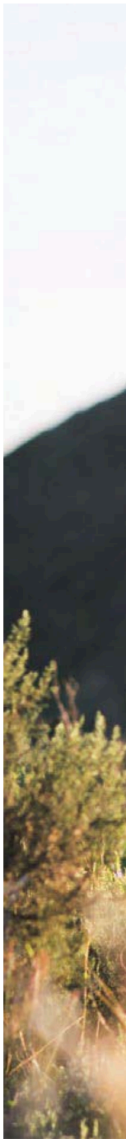
Practise closing 'the liking gap'

'The liking gap' describes the way that, after a social interaction, we consistently underestimate how much the other person enjoyed our company. We're overly pessimistic about the impression we've given, when actually research shows that, in general, it's likely the other person likes us a lot more than we imagine.

One experiment showed that the liking gap can linger for months. Despite living together, university roommates continued to feel insecure about the ways their companions viewed them for the best part of a year, for instance. Later research has shown that the liking gap is also prevalent among colleagues in the workplace, where it can limit creative collaborations.

There are many ways this holds us back: we vastly overestimate how awkward it'll be to talk to someone we don't know, but people are often more than grateful when a stranger strikes up a conversation – which hugely benefits everyone's wellbeing. And when we do have the chance to connect, we shy away from discussing deeper topics in favour of superficial small talk, yet it's exactly the deeper kind of conversation that would foster the creation of a shared reality.

Equally importantly, our compliments and our apologies are often misjudged, so that we fail to say the words that would help us to reinforce or repair the mutual understanding that is essential for a strong bond. And our fears of seeming needy or incompetent prevent us from asking for help, when a simple request for assistance can increase our standing in other people's eyes. Understanding this opened up the possibility to me that there was a huge potential for connection I was missing and that many other people are missing, too.





FIND A RUNNING BUDDY

MAKE CONNECTION A PART OF YOUR HEALTH PLAN

A research study of 7000 participants in the early 1960s, conducted by Dr Lester Breslow, a leading figure in public health, identified many of the ingredients that we now know are essential for good health: don't smoke; drink in moderation; sleep seven to eight hours a night; exercise regularly; avoid snacks; maintain a moderate weight; eat breakfast.

But, by 1979, two of Dr Breslow's colleagues found an eighth factor that influenced people's longevity: social connection. On average, the people with the greatest number of ties were between two and three times less likely to die than the loneliest individuals.

Extensive research now also confirms that social activities can boost our immune systems, reduce psychological distress, protect us from infection and help lower the risk of Alzheimer's and heart disease. When people feel that they have strong social support, they also perform better on tests of problem-solving and creativity and enjoy greater professional success.

It's now unquestionable: our social lives are fundamental to our health, and we need to make them a big consideration for our wellbeing. ►

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START A CHAT OVER A PET

Develop a 'growth mindset'

In the past, I had a fixed mindset. I assumed that my shyness was a fundamental part of who I was and struggled to see how I could change that. But, once I read the research on neuroplasticity, I realised the brain is incredibly adaptable. We can form good social habits. One tool to use is 'implementation intentions': rather than just having the good intention of being more social, you set yourself little 'if/then' rules that start with a cue followed by a behaviour. So, if I was feeling isolated and wanted to spark conversations with people, I might make the rule that if I saw a dog in the park, then I'd ask the owner if I could pat it, and if I could, ask a question about the dog's name to strike up a conversation.

The hope is that, with some of those connections, you're planting the seed of something that might flourish into a full friendship. And the more you practise this technique, the more habitual it becomes.

FACE DISAGREEMENTS, BUT AVOID AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIPS

There's a lot of research on different mindsets regarding relationships. You can have a destiny mindset, such as in romantic love, where you feel you're either made to be friends with someone or they're not for you. If you have that all-or-nothing attitude, you end up losing connections quite quickly. As soon as someone doesn't meet your high standards, you cut them out or dismiss them.

Actually, sometimes you can get a lot from a disagreement; it might change your attitude in a way that could make you wiser. Having said that, we have to recognise that some people can be toxic for us, particularly in 'ambivalent relationships', where people are sometimes supportive and sometimes unkind. The research shows that this can be more stressful than if somebody is reliably unkind, because the uncertainty of the interaction provokes a strong stress response. If they play too much of a role in your life, the long-term effects of unstable connections may be just as bad as having few connections at all. This should remind us not only to perhaps prune back the amount of ambivalent relationships we have, but also to be consistent in our treatment of others.

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WATCH OUT FOR THE CLOSENESS COMMUNICATION BIAS

Egocentrism occurs when you become too anchored in your own viewpoint and feelings and too easily assume that someone else feels the same. This is called the closeness communication bias, and we're actually worse at it with the people we're most intimate with. For example, we make an assumption about the way our partner feels about something rather than asking them. The problem is, when we make those assumptions, we show that we don't know the other person as well as they'd hoped, and it feels jarring. It creates cracks in that connection. Instead, we want to show humility by being constantly curious about people, particularly if we've known them for decades.

Sustain connection with self-expansion

In a friendship or romantic relationship, when you first meet someone, it's exhilarating to discover this whole new person who can help you to discover new things you didn't even realise about yourself. Then, over time, that can become tired once you stop discovering new things about each other. The way to counter that is to do new activities that give you opportunities to grow together, to exchange new feelings. This self-expansion is important, because it helps to keep the spark of connection alive in the long-term. You're creating a potential new world to discover together, just like you found a new world together when you first met.

BEWARE OF CO-RUMINATING

Co-rumination is when you fixate on problems and validate each other's negative feelings and unhappiness. It's like you're an echo chamber, amplifying the pain without trying to look at it more constructively. Studies show that people who co-ruminate feel validated and close, but their mental health suffers as a consequence. Actually, if someone is experiencing difficulty, true connection means not only listening, but also being more reflective, a bit more objective and suggesting different ways of interpreting a situation to move someone beyond a negative spiral. Asking questions such as 'What do you think you've learnt from this experience?' or 'How do you think you might feel about this in a year's time?' lets them know that when they're immersed in that darkness, there will be a light outside of it, even if they can't see it now. P

