

## **Relationships: Essential in the Process of Healing from Disasters and Leading Resilient Lives**

### **Part II**

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In [last month's article](#) I highlighted the significance of positive, supportive relationships in helping people cope more effectively in the face of natural or man-made disasters or other adversities. In addition, I emphasized that accentuating the impact of positive connections during times of disaster should not be interpreted to imply that a prime purpose for nurturing such relationships is to be better prepared to handle emotional turmoil in the face of catastrophic events. It certainly helps to be prepared for the possibility of major disruptions in our lives. However, as important, if not more so, is the recognition that the existence of strong connections is associated with leading more satisfying, purposeful, resilient lives even during so-called "ordinary" times (especially in today's world, "ordinary" is not equivalent to an absence of stress).

As one example of the lifelong impact of positive relationships, I cited the ongoing, 85-year-old Harvard study that began in 1938 with 268 Harvard sophomore men (Harvard was an all-male school at that time, but the study has been expanded to include the spouses and children of these men as well as inner city groups).

The fourth and current director of the study, psychiatrist Robert Waldinger at Harvard Medical School, expressed the importance of satisfying relationships as a foundation for physical and emotional well-being. In [an interview with Emine Saner of \*The Guardian\*](#), Waldinger observed, "There are things we can put in place in our lives that make us more likely to feel happiness more of the time. Taking care of your health, diet, sleep, and exercise are big ones. If you are in better health, you are more likely to be happy. But so is taking care of your relationships. That's partly because they help us with the flip side: they don't just make us happy; they also help us weather the unhappy times, the challenges."

### **Developing and Maintaining Positive Relationships**

I ended last month's article by noting I have often been asked in my clinical practice, consultations, and presentations how best to develop and maintain satisfying relations and that I would share some thoughts in this month's column. Before doing so, it's important to note that

some children and adults, especially those who been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) or nonverbal learning disorders (NLVD) have a more difficult time from birth developing empathy and understanding social cues. Consequently, they struggle more than others to develop positive, reciprocal relationships. They often require direct instruction to facilitate their appreciation of the dynamics of social interactions. While they may not attain the same level of social understanding and comfort as others, their social thinking and behaviors can certainly be strengthened.

I have found several very helpful resources when working with children and adults who display lags in their social thinking and social behaviors, including Rick Lavoie's *It's So Much Work to Be Your Friend: Helping the Child with Learning Disabilities Find Social Success*, Caroline Maguire's *Why Will No One Play with Me? The Play Better Plan to Help Children of All Ages Make Friends and Thrive*, and the many books and programs written and developed by Michelle Garcia Winner and Pamela Cook as part of their [Social Thinking methodology](#).

While we each possess different levels of skill and comfort in nurturing relationships, Waldinger suggested that we must be more intentional in sustaining various kinds of relationships. In the interview with Saner, he described it as "social fitness," noting that you don't visit the gym on two or three occasions and assume you have met your physical fitness requirements. "Good relationships wither away from neglect. There doesn't have to be a problem of any kind, but if you don't keep them up, they fall out of your life. We find that people who maintain vibrant social networks are the people who make an effort."

### **The Power of "Micromoments"**

I wrote in last month's article that some positive relationships can be forged by brief gestures or what I have referred to as "micromoments." Waldinger made a similar point when he suggested that maintaining friendships "doesn't have to be time-consuming—a regular text, a coffee, a walk. These can be tiny actions, but if you do them repeatedly it keeps those networks vibrant."

I also posed several questions at the end of my March piece, including to whom would you turn for support and who would turn to you? In a similar way, Waldinger stated that as part of the Harvard research project they asked respondents the following question: "Who could you call in the middle of the night if you were sick or scared?" Waldinger continued, "We believe that everybody needs at least one or two people like that. If you don't have that, you're probably

hurting. But then, beyond that, it really varies—a good relationship could be somebody you go to the pub with. Maybe you don't talk about anything personal, but you don't need to.”

Saner wrote, “Casual connections—a smile or a short conversation with the cashier in the supermarket or the bus driver—can also bring benefits. Ultimately, it comes down to connection and belonging. Join that club, don't use the self-service checkout, text a friend and meet them, read that story again to your child—your health and happiness depend on it.”

A parallel point was advanced in a [recent Harvard Health Publishing piece](#) by Heidi Godman. She reported the findings of a study conducted at Harvard Business School that showed an association between a sense of happiness and the number of even brief interactions one had beyond family—chatting with the check-out person at the supermarket, or a neighbor, or a friend you haven't spoken with in a while.

### **Vignettes from My Clinical Practice**

As a therapist I have worked with children and adults who would initially become anxious just thinking about uttering a brief hello. However, given the burgeoning body of research that indicates the benefits of having positive, supportive relationships in one's life, I have encouraged and assisted people to take these seemingly small steps in their interactions with others. Saying hello to your mail carrier or talking with your librarian can make it easier to initiate longer conversations with other people. Let me share a few examples from my clinical practice.

Jerry (a pseudonym) was in his late-20s when he came to see me, having been referred by his primary care physician. Jerry described himself as “shy and socially awkward.” He noted, “I always seem to tense up around others. I wish I was more comfortable in knowing what to say. I think I applied for the job I have had for several years since it is primarily remote so that I feel less anxious about having to interact with other people. The problem is that I'm feeling very lonely. I would like to have even one or two friends and would love to go out on a date, but I don't even know how to ask. I see myself is a ‘virgin dater’ and I'm feeling so distressed and lonely.” Jerry said that the idea of using a dating app made him even more anxious.

The following represents several months of my sessions with Jerry: I asked him what is it that he likes to do. He reported being a “voracious reader” of fiction and nonfiction alike. I knew that in the vicinity in which he lived, it was not unusual for a bookstore or a library to have authors do a book reading. He knew of such readings but had been reluctant to go. We discussed

how attending such an event could prove to be a “safe” haven for meeting others. He could attend just to hear the author and then leave. Or, there might be an opportunity to discuss the reading afterwards with others. He felt that having a more structured focus, centering around the discussion of a book might ease some of his worries about what to say.

During the first reading, which he attended at the local library, he met a couple his age and they invited him to go out for coffee afterwards to continue discussing the book. Jerry told me, “I was more at ease when we were talking about the book. I became more anxious when we moved into some other topics, but overall, I felt more comfortable than I thought I would.”

The next reading Jerry attended was held at a local bookstore and it proved to be a lifechanging event. He did not know anyone in the audience, but afterwards at the table with coffee, he began to speak with a woman about the book. Jerry observed, “I felt she was as anxious as I was. We continued to talk about the book and soon realized the library was closing. I summoned up all of my courage and actually asked her if she would like to go to a local coffee shop to continue the discussion, just as the couple from the first reading had invited me. To be honest, I expected that she would politely decline my offer, but she did not. We really hit it off. It was one of the happiest I’ve felt in years and I’m going to see her again.”

Not every intervention will turn out to be as successful, but this one definitely was. Their initial meeting resulted in many more dates, and now they are living together. As a result of their relationship, Jerry’s network of friends has expanded.

I began to see Sue (a pseudonym) when she was 12 years old. She was referred by her school counselor who voiced concern about Sue’s anxiety when taking tests and her isolation from her peers. The counselor told me, “Sue’s a very kind, very attractive girl. She’s also very insecure and often walks around with her head down, which certainly makes it difficult for her to make friends.”

Similar to my description of my therapy with Jerry, I will condense many months of my work with Sue. It turned out her passion, her perceived “island of competence,” was her singing ability. Although it took some “prodding” on my part, she sang a song in my office. I was truly taken by the quality of her voice. Although she had been hesitant to try out for the choir or for a musical at the school, with the encouragement of both her counselor and myself, she did so. At the auditions, Sue thought that at best, she would get a small role since “nobody gets cut if they try out.”

Much to her surprise and apprehension, Sue was given a notable role that involved singing a solo. Attending rehearsals permitted her to slowly make friends with some of the other performers. At Sue's request and with the okay of her parents, I attended her first performance. I sensed that while my presence afforded her some comfort, it also provided her a way to show me her "islands of competence" as a gesture of appreciation. Her acting and her solo were excellent and as she performed, she seemed at ease and not at all anxious.

At our next session, Sue thanked me for attending. I said it was a pleasure to see her in the play. When I noted how calm she appeared during the show, she offered a very insightful comment. "I don't get nervous performing since I don't have a problem memorizing the lines and I know exactly what to say. I have a script to follow. When I'm talking with other kids, I get nervous since I don't have a script to follow." Then she smiled and said, "But I'm feeling more comfortable speaking with other kids even without a script."

### **Takeaway Messages**

The following are a few takeaway messages from this and last month's articles:

Positive, supportive relationships are a foundation for physical and emotional health.

Such relationships must not be taken for granted.

We must be intentional in developing and maintaining positive relationships in our personal and professional lives. As Robert Waldinger has advised, we must ensure that we spend time to maintain these relationships lest they "wither away from neglect."

As parents, teachers, or caregivers, we must strive to provide supportive, encouraging relationships with children.

Positive relationships may be forged, in part, by the presence of seemingly small actions (micromoments) that accumulate over time and contribute to our well-being.

The number of relationships is less important than the positive quality of these relationships.

And one final comment: Think of one micromoment that you can initiate during the next few days to enrich one of your relationships.

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