



THE HEALING POWERS OF COMMUNITY

HOW CREATING COMMUNITY CAN ENRICH—EVEN PROLONG—YOUR LIFE

In the early 1960s, a small town in Pennsylvania became the focus of attention for scores of medical researchers. The community of Roseto appeared unremarkable in every way except one: Its inhabitants were among the healthiest people in the United States. The rate at which they died of heart disease was significantly lower than the national average, and they exhibited greater resistance to peptic ulcers and senility than other Americans.

When researchers searched for clues to the Rosetans' health and longevity among the usual array of factors, they came up empty-handed. The folks in Roseto smoked as much, exercised as little, and faced the same stressful situations as other Americans. The residents of this closely knit Italian-American community practiced no better health habits than their neighbors. So why were they so healthy?

The answer surprised the researchers. After extensive testing, they learned that the Rosetans' remarkable health was linked to their strong sense of community and camaraderie. The town was not so ordinary after all. "More than that of any other town we studied, Roseto's social structure reflected old-world values and tradi-

tions," says Dr. Stewart Wolf in a booklet summarizing the study that he directed. "There was a remarkable cohesiveness and sense of unconditional support within the community. Family ties were very strong."

Developments since the initial study underscored this conclusion. As young Rosetans began to marry outside the clan, move away from the town's traditions, and sever emotional and physical ties with the community, the healthy edge Roseto held over neighboring towns began to lessen until, by the mid-1970s, its mortality rates had climbed as high as the national average.

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While you cannot, and for many reasons would not want to, recreate the patriarchal, religion-bound, old-world traditions that helped keep Rosetans healthy, you can discern the positive qualities of social interaction that contributed to their health and take steps to nourish these qualities in various areas of your life.

An important reason to seek functional or conscious community, even protocommunity, is that it can keep you healthier in many respects. The Roseto findings are far from unique. Contemporary medical psychological

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and sociological literature overflows with studies that point to the life-prolonging, even life-saving qualities of interpersonal support. For example:

- Dr. Dean Ornish, a California specialist in coronary heart disease, developed a treatment program with support groups that surprised even him and his colleagues with its positive results: Chest pains diminished or went away entirely, severe blockages in coronary arteries reversed, and patients became more energetic. In Ornish's study, which was partially funded by the National Institutes of Health, patients lived together for a week in a retreat, then met two evenings every week for four hours.

"At first," Ornish writes in *Dr. Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease*, "I viewed our support groups simply as a way to motivate patients to stay on the other aspects of the program that I considered most important: the diet, exercise, stress management training, stopping smoking, and so on. Over time, I began to realize that the group support itself was one of the most powerful interventions, as it addressed what I am beginning to believe is a more fundamental cause of why we feel stressed and, in turn, why we get illnesses like heart disease: the perception of isolation.

"In short, anything that promotes a sense of isolation leads to chronic stress and, often, to illnesses like heart disease. Conversely, anything that leads to real intimacy and feelings of connection can be healing in the real sense of the word: to bring together, to make whole. The ability to be intimate has long been seen as a key to emotional health; I believe it is essential to the health of our hearts as well."

- The University of Michigan's Dr. James House and two fellow sociologists concluded, from their own studies and those of others, that there is a clear link between poor social relationships and poor health. "It's the 10 to 20 percent of people who say they have nobody with whom they can share their private feelings, or who have close contact with others less than once a week, who are most at risk," the researchers declared. This risk extends to life itself. In fact, House reports, the people with the weakest social ties have significantly higher death rates—100 percent to 300 percent for men, 50 percent to 150 percent for women—than their counterparts who are more socially integrated in terms of marital and family status, contacts with friends, church memberships, and other group affiliations.

- A study at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital and Columbia University in New York City revealed that, for people with heart disease, living alone is a major independent risk factor comparable to such factors as previous heart damage and heart rhythm disturbances. The

data indicate that heart attack patients living alone are twice as likely as others to suffer another heart attack, and more likely to die of an attack, within six months.

"What's particularly significant is the magnitude of the effect," said clinical psychologist Nan Case, co-author of the study. "We know that emotions and [social] integration have an effect, but we never knew it could come close to the physiological factors in heart disease."

- A team of Stanford Medical School psychiatrists, led by Dr. David Spiegel, found that metastatic breast cancer patients who joined support groups lived nearly twice as long as those receiving only medical care.

- At Ohio State University, psychologist Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and her colleagues discovered, in comparing thirty-eight married women with thirty-eight separated or divorced women, that the married women had better immune functions than the unmarried women.

Several studies suggest that it is not the number of personal contacts that affects people's health, but the degree to which people perceive that they have someone they can turn to. Social networks do not always feel like community. Unhappy marriages, alcoholic families, and other dysfunctional relationships can actually damage a person's health. Psychologists at the University of Washington concluded that even supportive actions and words do not necessarily translate into perceived support. "It all depends on whether your social support comes from someone you believe truly loves, values, and respects you," concluded one of the researchers, Dr. Gregory Pierce.

Psychologist Robert Ornstein and physician David Sobel believe that human beings evolved as social animals, and that our brains are programmed to connect us with others in order to improve our chances of survival. When the brain detects signals of isolation or emotional imbalance, it transmits these signals to other parts of the body. The way you interact with family members, co-workers, and others in your social sphere is translated by brain mechanisms into changes in hormone levels and in neurotransmitters.

"People need people," the researchers conclude in *The Healing Brain*. "Not only for the practical benefits which derive from group life, but for our very health and survival. Somehow interaction with the larger social world of others draws our attention outside of ourselves, enlarges our focus, enhances our ability to cope, and seems to make the brain reactions more stable and the person less vulnerable to disease."

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HEAL
ME

OAF OF HIPPOCRATES

Note: Before you read this article about medical care, let me warn you that I am not a doctor. I did, however, study first aid when I was in the Boy Scouts. We scouts used to meet in the Methodist church basement and apply tourniquets to each other, and we got really good at it. We once applied a tourniquet to Randy Lape that was so elaborate he couldn't move any part of his body, and he probably would have lain there until he starved to death if the choir hadn't shown up for rehearsal. I just thought you should be aware of this before you read this article, assuming you still want to.

You should get a thorough physical examination at least twice a year, unless you have to pay for it personally, in which case you should get one every eight years or whenever you think something is really wrong with you, whichever comes first.

HEAL
ME

You can usually tell when something is really wrong with you, because you feel really lousy even when you haven't been drinking. Sometimes you can cure yourself merely by calling your employer and saying, in a sincere, sick voice, that you won't be coming in to work. If you have faked illnesses in the past, you should subtly let your employer know that you really are sick this time. Retch frequently, and say something like "I'm really sick this time. Really. *(Pause here for a retch.)* Honestly."

If your symptoms don't go away, you should call your doctor's office. Notice I say "doctor's office," not "doctor." Under American Medical Association rules, doctors are not allowed to talk to patients over the telephone, because this would be unethical.

So when you call the doctor's office, you will talk to a medical personnel wearing a white outfit, whose job is to make an appointment for you to come in roughly six weeks later. If you are really sick, and you are a regular patient, the medical personnel may agree to talk to the doctor on your behalf, and your doctor may agree to phone the drugstore and order you a little bottle of pills that costs \$34.38. But if you are really *really* sick, too sick to go to the drugstore, too sick to walk, too sick to even move, the doctor may want you to come to his office right away and sit in the waiting room.

Assuming you can get to the doctor's office without dying, your first job is to find a good seat, ideally one that is close to the tropical-fish tank and as far as possible from patients with visible fungus. Then you should read an

old copy of *National Geographic*. Doctors like to have *National Geographic* in their waiting rooms, because it reminds patients that in many primitive countries people are not fortunate enough to have the kind of medical care we have here in the U.S.A. Many patients feel so much better after reading it for a couple of hours that they don't even need to see the doctor. They just pay their bills and leave.

But if you still feel sick, the medical personnel will order you to undress and put on a garment that gives your secret bodily parts a high degree of visibility. Then they'll take some blood out of your arm and make you go into a bathroom and urinate into a glass container. While you're in there, the medical personnel will hide, giggling, in a closet, so that when you emerge you have to parade around, bodily parts flashing in every direction, looking for somebody to give the container to. None of this has anything to do with curing you. Why on earth would they want your blood and urine? They'll just throw it away. The point of all this is to determine whether you are really, sincerely sick, sick enough to actually see the doctor.

If you pass this test, you get to go into a little room and sit on a table covered with cold waxed paper for about 45 minutes—this is the final test—while the doctor watches you through a secret peephole. If he is satisfied that you qualify, he'll bustle into the room and prod you with various implements, muttering all the while. The doctor is not allowed to tell you directly what is wrong—again, this would be a breach of ethics—so you have to listen closely to his muttering, and interpret it. Here are the standard doctor mutters, translated to laymen's terms:

- "Uh huh": This means "Oh my God."
- "Ummm": This means "Good Lord."
- "Ah hah": This means "I vaguely remember seeing a case like this in medical school, but it hadn't advanced nearly this far."

After the doctor has finished prodding you, either he will send you to the hospital, which will give you a battery of extremely humiliating tests designed to weed out people who are not serious about being hospitalized, or he will call the drugstore and order you a small bottle of pills that costs \$34.38. If he spent much time in the Boy Scouts, he may also decide to apply a tourniquet.

From Bad Habits: A 100% Fact Free Book (Doubleday and Co., 1985).