

How Healthy Is Your Social Biome?

7 MIN READ

JUN. 18, 2025

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Our friends, partners, and even strangers make up an ecosystem of connection that influences our physical, mental, and emotional health.

Thanks to years of social science research, we understand that being “healthy” depends on more than what we eat or how much we sleep and exercise. Having positive, supportive relationships plays an outsized role in human thriving, influencing our health *and* longevity.

The nation’s **longest study on happiness** in 2017 revealed that the most important factor for living a long, happy life is having close relationships.

Meanwhile, research from around the globe has expanded our understanding that social health is built on a variety of types and levels of interaction. This includes people close to us, our chosen communities (neighbors, teammates, coworkers, hobby groups, or others with whom we share some identity), even so-called “weak ties” with people we don’t know well but share friendly exchanges with.

And while in-person interactions offer the **biggest benefits**, all forms of positive interaction can help us feel connected to others.

Collectively, these relationships and interactions make up our social biome, a phrase coined by social scientists Andy Morella and Jeffrey A. Hall, referring to individual ecosystems of connection that influence our physical, mental, and emotional health.

A Healthy Social Biome Is a Longevity Driver

It makes sense that feeling supported, seen, and cared for would positively influence emotional and mental health.

Humans are social creatures, evolved to band together for survival. Lack of social connection can be experienced by the body as an existential threat, triggering the stress response, and even altering our brain chemistry and causing neural responses akin to pain. It's also associated with worsened mental-health outcomes, including depression and increased risk of cognitive decline.

But even as far back as 1979, research was establishing important links between social connection and lifespan, noting that men without social support were twice as likely to die prematurely — and women were three times as likely — as people with social networks.

We now know that isolation is bad for your health:

- ■ Loneliness and social isolation raise your risk for life-threatening chronic conditions, including heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, and dementia.
- ■ Social isolation increases the risk of systemic inflammation in midlife, and can make you more vulnerable to getting sick after exposure to a virus.
- ■ Lacking social connection raises your risk of premature death equal to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and twice as much as obesity.
- ■ One large cohort analysis found that people who live alone and are socially disconnected were 77% more likely to die of any cause over 12 years.

Meanwhile, the health benefits of social connection are vast.

- Connection improves **resilience**, buffering the stress response and minimizing the negative health impacts of stress.
- ■ It can support immunity by increasing **oxytocin**, which influences immune cell activity, and reducing cortisol levels, which can suppress immune function. It may also increase **antiviral activity**.
- ■ People with a sense of community belongingness are **2.6 times more likely to report good or excellent health** than people with a low sense of belongingness.
- ■ Social interactions lead to increased **feelings of hope** that last throughout the day.

How Healthy Is Your Social Biome?

Just like the gut microbiome shapes our physical health, our *social biome* has a profound impact on our emotional and physical well-being. A well-nourished social biome supports resilience, longevity, and even immune function, while a depleted one can increase stress, isolation, and risk of chronic disease. In their book **The Social Biome: How Everyday Communication Connects and Shapes Us**, authors Morella and Hall outline five essential ingredients for cultivating a vibrant, life-enhancing social ecosystem.

5 Signs of a Healthy Social Biome

1) **Diverse social interactions.** We need a variety of types and levels of positive interactions. This includes:

- ■ with people close to us; with colleagues, neighbors, teammates or other group connections; with casual acquaintances; and with strangers. One **study** found that compared to people with homogenous social circles, those with diverse networks,

including people of different ages, genders, socioeconomic status, occupation, religious affiliation, and more, had better health.

- ■ in person, over the phone, and other forms of communication
- ■ through in-depth conversations, friendly collaborations, check-ins, and casual chit-chat or acknowledgments

2) **Restorative solitude.** Everyone needs time alone to recharge, even extroverts. Too much isn't good, but just enough supports emotional regulation, provides perspective, and restores energy, preparing you to re-engage with the world.

3) **Meaningful talk.** The quality of our conversations matter. Not all communication has to be weighty, but having regular meaningful interactions, where you feel expressed and understood, are important.

4) **Communication with strangers.** We may not think much of them at the time, but friendly exchanges while waiting in line, banter with a store clerk, or a shared smile with a stranger, all nourish our social biome. These simple interactions fuel a reciprocal openness to the world that makes us feel happier and supports health.

5) **Choosing connection.** Whether or not you choose to interact, from joining an outing to raising your eyes to meet another's gaze, sets a tone and influences the strength of your social biome. With more people living alone and fewer joining social groups or clubs, the authors warn that choosing solitude "can crystallize into personal routines of disconnection." In other words, supporting your social biome requires intention.

How Much Social Interaction Do I Need?

There is no exact formula that creates the conditions for a "perfect" social biome. The right ratio of interactions will be different for everyone, and maybe at different times. In *The Art and Science of Connection*, social scientist Kasley Killam, who calls social

health “proactive and preventive,” explains that the right formula for you may take experimentation, and will likely change throughout your life. She suggests trying on the 5-3-1 model, which was first revealed by Canadian social scientists in a 2021 **national social connection survey**. Their data found that people who have the highest well-being scores:

Use the 5-3-1 model of Connection:

Five: **Connect with 5 different people each week**, including in-person, over the phone, or through other forms of communication with friends, family members, loved ones, co-workers, or neighbors.

Three: **Maintain 3 close relationships** of what Killam calls your “innermost circle.” Think: Loved ones, good friends, family members.

One: **Spend 1 hour per day being socially engaged**. This could mean hanging out with one person, being in a class or activity with others, or a mix of short but fulfilling social interactions with different people.

Being social doesn’t come naturally to everyone. It requires a lot of energy and a bit of bravery to put yourself out there. On the flip side, even extroverts may find that a full social life without meaningful connections or alone time just leaves them feeling tired and under-nourished. Wherever you land on the social spectrum, finding the right level of connection means tuning in to what feels right for you. And it may not match the 5-3-1 model. That’s OK. “There is no one right way to have a healthy social life,” Killam writes. She offers a few suggestions to start right where you are.

Start where you are:

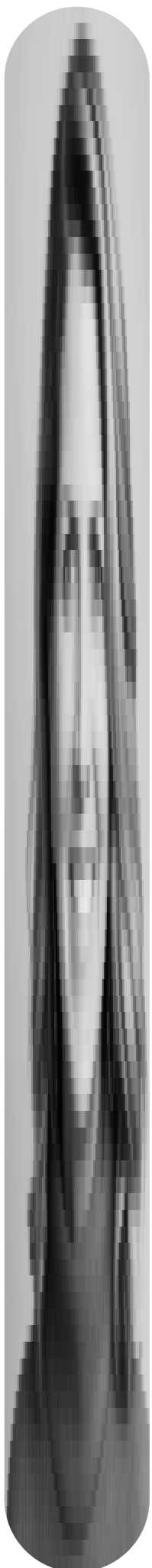
- ■ **Connect with those most important to you.** Create a list of people you care about, regularly review it, and choose someone to connect with that week: make a date, plan a phone call, send a text or email. It helps to put the list somewhere you will always see it.

- **Set “connection goals”** the same way you set fitness, financial, or other goals. Create milestones (make 2 new friends this year, reconnect with friends in a different state, carve out regular time to yourself), make a plan (join a class, ask a colleague to lunch, send a Zoom invite, practice saying “no” to commitments), and hold yourself accountable.
- ■ **Put connection on the calendar.** It could be a standing event, like a weekly tennis game or monthly book club meeting, or self-imposed dates, like doing a weekly check-in with an elderly relative or neighbor.

Focusing on your social health may feel awkward at first. But like any practice, as you develop the skills that make connections easier, like relational intelligence, it will start to feel more natural. And the benefit? A nourished social biome to support your longest, happiest, healthiest life.

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