

## Staying Connected

One of the most important tools to stay mentally healthy can't be found in any bottle of pills you can get from the chemist. Neither can you get it from a healthy diet.

You can't eat, drink or breathe it, yet in many ways it is as important to our survival as food, water or air. That thing is communication and a sense of connection.

Humans are social animals; we are born with a hard-wired need for attention and interaction. Our need for these things is so great in fact, that infants who don't receive enough have a chance of dying.

The impact of a lack of human connection can be felt throughout our entire lives, according to an American study. It found that people with strong social and community ties were two to three times less likely to die over a nine year period.

It is disheartening then, that it is often during the times when we are most likely to need this support - when we are experiencing mental illness - that it is most difficult to come by.

Life during periods of mental illness can feel lonely, regardless of whether you're the one experiencing it firsthand or living with someone who is.

While the sense of stigma and discrimination surrounding mental illness is decreasing,

there's still a sense of awkwardness surrounding the subject.

If you break your leg or get the flu, it doesn't fundamentally change who you are or the way people think of you. If you're diagnosed with a mental illness however, people tend to see you in a completely different light.

Broken legs heal. The flu abates. Severe mental illness is also often a passing thing thanks to modern medicine and treatment, but the mark it leaves upon your life seems to be all too enduring.

Because they're unsure what to do or say around you, friends and acquaintances may stop visiting when you or someone you live with has become unwell.

It's important to remember during these times that having a mental illness doesn't define who a person is - it's just a small facet of their own life experience.

You don't have to be a health professional to be a friend to someone who has experienced mental illness, or need to treat them any differently. In fact, just by being there you are providing something more therapeutic than you may at first be able to appreciate.

Self stigma can be one of the most damaging effects of mental illness; in many cases it can in fact have a more negative impact

than the condition itself. It can do much to change the way a person thinks about themselves and expects to be treated by others because of their experience.

You can help reduce this impact by providing the same friendship you would during any other difficult time.

**Staying connected** is the theme of this year's mental health awareness week. It's a time to remember that a sense of connection is important for *everyone's* mental health—whether or not they've experienced mental illness.



It's never been easier to get in touch with your friends and family; they're just a touch of a button or a mouse click away thanks to mobile phones and the internet.

A small gesture like leaving a comment or sending a text may not seem like a lot, but it can mean a great deal to whoever receives it.

If you've got the time, perhaps you could phone your friend and have a chat with them. Or even better, arrange for a time to visit them in person.

While they may not always feel like spending time with you, you'll still brighten your friend's day and give them a sense of inclusion by asking.

Tony Spencer

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