

What is social connectedness?

The Full Frame Initiative (FFI) defines social connectedness as *the degree to which a person has and perceives a sufficient number and diversity of relationships that: allow her or him to give and receive information, emotional support, and material aid; create a sense of belonging and value; and foster growth.* Research shows that the quantity, quality, and diversity of people’s social connections, as well as their perceptions of those connections, all matter.

Why is social connectedness important?

Social connections provide people with the emotional support, material help, and information they need to thrive. Social connectedness — both the sum of individual relationships and a sense of belonging — is crucial to overall health and wellbeing.

What are the health and other implications of social connectedness?

- ✦ Greater social support has been linked to a lower risk for cancer recurrence, higher survival rates among heart attack survivors, lower blood pressure, better immune responses, and better psychological wellbeing.^{1 2 3} On the other hand, social isolation has been associated with an increased risk of multiple diseases and mortality.⁴
- ✦ Although receiving social support is important, providing support to others is also linked to better outcomes, such as higher self-esteem and a greater sense of control.⁵
- ✦ Children exposed to repeated violence who have social support in their family, school and peer groups function better than children without these supports.⁶
- ✦ Social connections lessen the impact of stress and trauma. Just knowing that support is available, even if it is not needed or used, gives people a sense that they have someone to turn to in a time of need.^{7 8 9}
- ✦ Increased social cohesion is linked to reports of greater neighborhood safety for people living in low-income public housing.¹⁰ Social cohesion is also related to higher rates of physical activity and lower risk for obesity among children regardless of neighborhood physical characteristics.¹¹

Factors such as race, class, gender, age and education can have a significant impact on people’s social connectedness and the benefits they receive from these connections.¹² For example:

- ✦ People living in poverty are often in greater need of social support but often have fewer actual and perceived social supports.¹³ They are also less likely to experience the connectedness across differences such as race, culture and class that give people not living in poverty greater connections to resources.¹⁴

Related Terms, Concepts & Definitions:

RECIPROCITY: A balance between giving and receiving social support.

SOCIAL CAPITAL: The actual and potential social resources available to individuals, groups or communities through connections.

SOCIAL COHESION: The extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION: The actual or perceived connectedness with others within social groups, communities and networks.

SOCIAL ISOLATION: The actual or perceived disconnect from others, characterized by a lack of meaningful contact, interactions and/or relationships.

SOCIAL NETWORK: The aggregate, or web, of individual social relationships and ties.

SOCIAL SUPPORT: Actual and/or perceived resources provided in the context of human relationships. These resources include material/instrumental (e.g., financial or practical assistance), emotional/appraisal (e.g., advice and encouragement), and informational (e.g., knowledge sharing) supports.

- ✧ Social connectedness may be one factor that helps to explain unemployment disparities found among White and Black adults.¹⁵ For example, 70% of jobs held by White employees were acquired through their social connections to their White peers — peers with more access to resources than racial minorities.¹⁶
- ✧ Reciprocity is important for health and wellbeing, but people living in poverty often experience an imbalance between the support they provide and the support they receive.¹⁷
- ✧ As people age, their social networks often become smaller and their social ties weaker. Declining health and illness may also contribute to social isolation.¹⁸
- ✧ Individuals who live in more rural areas are likely to have more social support and fewer negative interactions, even though poverty is more common.¹⁹

Are all relationships equally beneficial?

No. Positive relationships involve reciprocity and trust. However, even positive relationships can cause stress and feelings of exploitation. On the other hand, relationships labeled by outsiders as detrimental and problematic can have positive aspects. For example, a person may choose to live with a partner who is an alcoholic because the relationship provides safety, companionship, and shelter.²⁰ For this reason it is critical to take into account the full context of a relationship. Furthermore, the diversity of people's relationships matter, especially for children and youth. Youth need to connect not only with peers, but also with supportive adults (familial or non-familial) for healthy development.²¹

Social connectedness is sustainable only when it is long-term (relationships that can be relied on over long periods of time) and comprehensive (encompassing emotional, material, and informational support from a number of individuals).

How is social connectedness related to other Domains of Wellbeing?

For comprehensive wellbeing, social connectedness must be experienced along with stability, safety, mastery, and meaningful access to relevant resources. For example:

- ✧ **Social Connectedness and Safety:** A growing sense of safety and trust in others enables social connections to develop. Existing social connections may actually protect against the negative effects of unsafe conditions. For example, a sense of connectedness to a particular group or community helps to offset the negative physical health outcomes attributed to living in a high risk situation or community.^{22 23}
- ✧ **Social Connectedness and Meaningful Access to Relevant Resources:** Through formal (i.e., service providers) and informal (i.e., friends and family) connections with others, individuals become aware of resources available to them. Although connections with others may enable a person's access to resources, who is actually providing the support matters.²⁴ For example, access to only formal support may compromise a person's sense of control, choice and efficacy because formal support is often one-sided and time-limited.²⁵ Furthermore, some individuals prefer support from friends and family and are more likely to follow through on recommendations given by these connections.^{26 27}

*This fact sheet is one of a series on the Full Frame Initiative's Five Domains of Wellbeing — **social connectedness, stability, safety, mastery and meaningful access to relevant resources** — the universal, interdependent and non-hierarchical essential needs we all have. The Full Frame Initiative's mission is to change systems so that people and communities experiencing poverty, violence and trauma have the tools, supports and resources they need to thrive.*

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Endnotes

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