

Do You Know Your Neighbor?

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Mister Rogers begins his “television house” with “Won’t you be my neighbor?” His invitation includes everyone, regardless of educational level, accomplishments, or looks. His familiar routine is a way of saying, “Let’s have some relaxing time together.” Often, his regular neighbors or guests drop by to share their interests and friendship.

Unlike Mister Rogers’s neighborhood, there has been a decreasing trend of social networks in our society recently. We socialize with friends and family less frequently, know our neighbors less, and belong to fewer organizations. It has been found that this decrease in social networks may be eroding our country and having detrimental effects on children, families, neighborhoods, and even our democratic political structure.



Facts: from the Saguaro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America

- Having friends over is down by 45 percent over the last 25 years.
- Participation in clubs and civic organizations has been cut by more than half over the last 25 years.
- Church attendance is down by roughly one-third since the 1960s.
- More Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling in leagues. We are bowling alone.
- Joining and participating in one group cuts your odds of dying over the next year in half. Joining two groups cuts it by three-quarters.
- The Internet didn’t cause our civic disengagement. We were well on our way to civic disengagement when Bill Gates was in grade school.
- In the last two decades, more women have joined the workforce for a variety of reasons.

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- Each 10 minutes of additional commuting time cuts all forms of social capital by 10 percent – 10 percent less church-going, 10 percent fewer club meetings, 10 percent fewer evenings with friends, etc.
- If you had to choose between 10 percent more cops on the beat or 10 percent more citizens knowing their neighbors' first names, the latter is a better crime prevention strategy.
- If you had to choose between 10 percent more teachers or 10 percent more parents being involved in their kids' education, the latter is a better route to educational achievement.

What Are Social Networks?

“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” This cliché often is used to describe social capital. Social networks are the connections and relationships among and between individuals. Simply speaking, social networks can be described as connections that are advantageous. Our family, friends, and associates represent an important asset, one that can be called for help during crises, for enjoyment, and/or for leveraging material gains.

Families rooted in rich social-support networks have increased access to information, material resources, and friends and neighbors to assist them in managing their daily lives, and resolving occasional problems.

Conversely, the absence of social ties can have an equally important impact.

Communities with higher levels of social connections are likely to have higher educational achievement, better-performing governmental institutions, faster economic growth, and less crime and violence.

The people living in these communities are likely to be happier and healthier and to have a longer life expectancy. In places with greater social connectedness, it is easier to mobilize people to tackle problems of public concern.

How Can We Build Social Networks?

Social networks are built by making new ties and strengthening old ones. The new ties may be formal, like a club, association, or civic institution. These ties also may be informal, like a group of friends talking or colleagues collaborating. You can help build social networks through hundreds of actions. Listed below are just a few ideas. Do you have others? Build connections with people, build trust with others, and get involved.

- Surprise a new neighbor by making a favorite dinner – and include the recipe.
- Tape record your parents' earliest recollections and share them with your children.
- Plan a vacation with friends or family.
- Attend home parties when invited.
- Invite local government officials to community groups.
- Go to church . . . or attend temple . . . or go outside with your children – talk to them about spirituality.
- If you grow tomatoes, plant extra for a lonely elder. Ask him or her to teach you how to preserve the extras.
- Gather a group to clean up a local park.
- Form or join a bowling team.
- Tell friends and family about social networks and why they matter.

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