Social support refers to the emotional and practical advice, love, help, resources, information and empathy we give and receive among family, friends and community. We all have a need to belong and to feel connected to others in some way. Experts say there is compelling evidence that the social connections we form with individuals, family and community significantly affect our health and wellbeing. A lack of social connectedness creates a risk to health, particularly mental and heart health. However, to build or maintain social connections requires a level of self-confidence that many women say they don’t have.

When our need to feel connected is satisfied we have an increased sense of wellbeing and show a more positive outlook on life. Conversely, having few social connections and being socially isolated leads to feelings of anxiousness and can result in becoming mentally and/or physically unwell.

Why is feeling socially connected so important?

Dr Russ Harris (author of The Happiness Trap) explains that being socially connected was essential to our survival in earlier times when society functioned as one large group. The survival of the group depended upon social cohesion in order to hunt, fight and avoid danger. Alienation from the group resulted in threats to survival: starvation, exposure to the elements or predators. This link between survival and social connectedness remains ingrained and may partly explain why our physical and mental wellbeing is so intricately connected to belonging to social networks.
Social connections and physical health

Social connectedness and belonging have been shown to have a significant effect on physical health, particularly heart health. This was demonstrated in a study showing those with adequate social relationships have a 50% greater likelihood of living longer compared with those with poor or insufficient social relationships. Connectedness is interpreted as a reward by the brain and is associated with the release of one of the happiness hormones, dopamine.

On the negative side, depression, social isolation and lack of quality social support are risk factors for the onset of physical diseases, such as heart disease. The presence of depression can be both a cause and a consequence of lack of social support.

Women and social connectedness

Women may be more vulnerable to social isolation. One recent study found that women of all ages were more likely than men to have no family member they could confide in. Women’s risk of social isolation is also related to their increased risk of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety.

According to Jean Hailes psychologist and Head of Translation Dr Mandy Deeks, relationships are centrally important to women’s sense of wellbeing.

“Many women define themselves by their interpersonal relationships and have an emotional need for intimacy and connectedness,” she says. “When these relationships are satisfying women have higher levels of emotional wellbeing and self-confidence.”

Social confidence

Part of the cause of women’s social isolation may be a lack of social confidence, which can prevent them from taking part in social events or developing social connections. According to Jane Fisher, the Jean Hailes Professor of Women’s Health at Monash University, many women show signs of social anxiety.

“Social anxiety or over-concern about social approval is widespread among less-confident women. More confident women find social connections easier to make and maintain, and shyer or more anxious women can have the opposite experiences,” says Professor Fisher.

One way women can lower their risk of social isolation is to increase their level of social confidence. Research shows that those with higher levels of self-confidence have more or better quality social connections, further increasing self-confidence.
Young women

Young women have many social groups in their lives such as family, school friends, peers and community groups. Being part of social groups for young women has an important protective effect and lowers the risk of problems such as emotional distress, drug taking, social maladjustment and suicidal thoughts.

Young women with higher levels of social connectedness show higher levels of wellbeing such as optimism, hope, coping, happiness, and life satisfaction. However, young women may lack the social skills and confidence to make social connections.

Midlife women

Women in the middle years can experience life events that may affect their levels of social connectedness. Challenges such as children at different ages and stages, and perhaps changing work roles can reduce the range of their social networks. Also, for some women menopause can impact mood, anxiety and confidence levels, possibly leading to increased social isolation.

Older women

Growing older can increase the likelihood of becoming socially isolated. For example, as mothers, women may lose their connections with their children as they move out and begin their own lives. As women age they face a number of losses such as leaving the workforce, the death of life partners and the loss of physical health. All of these cumulative losses can increase the risk of social isolation.

Building social confidence

Professor Fisher suggests taking a positive approach to building social confidence.

“Worry less about what others think of you and focus on the benefits that social connections bring,” she says.

Social media and connectedness

The negative aspects of social media are known, however, online social contact can be a good way to connect with people, particularly people with barriers to attending social events such as living in rural and remote areas, low income, physical limitations, poor self-confidence or roles such as mothering and being a carer. Research indicates that social media can be a good way to connect with groups, particularly with those who share common interests.

Tips to increase social connectedness

1. Volunteer

2. Be less critical of yourself and others in social situations

3. Join a group (e.g. book club, painting group or environmental group)

4. Practise looking more confident – maintain eye contact and appear interested and engaged

5. Seek out groups on social media who share similar interests and values

6. When in social situations talk to people about their areas of interest and find mutual connections

7. Don’t avoid social situations

8. If you feel nervous, take a friend with you to social gatherings