



## SOCIAL CONNECTION

February traditionally reminds me of celebrations – Ground Hog Day, Super Bowl Sunday, Valentine’s Day, Mardi Gras. Regardless of the occasion, we gather together to abandon our overly optimistic New Year’s Resolutions and remember how good it feels to connect with friends, loved ones and like-minded idiots. The pandemic certainly didn’t deter football fans from celebrating Super Bowl Sunday. As the host city and the winning team, Tampa is still recovering from the revelry. Despite repeated warnings, fans pre-gamed, attended in whatever way they could, and celebrated the Buccaneers’ victory until the blast of an air horn at 3:00 AM Monday let everyone know the party was over.

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We needed a party. After almost a year of social isolation, it was time. In order to feel well, we need approximately six hours of daily social interaction. Amanda Mull’s article, “The Pandemic Has Erased Entire Categories of Friendship,” published last month in *The Atlantic*, reminded me of this critical aspect of our wellbeing. For those of us fortunate enough to work from home, we have our pods. We have stayed in touch with our closest ties, but we are missing those outer circle interactions that remind us that we are part of something bigger. If we are able to go to our workplaces, there are safety protocols that prevent us not only from close contact but also from reading facial expressions. Since approximately 90% of communication is non-verbal, these interactions are less fulfilling. When the institutions to which we belong closed or limited their access, we lost those communities.

Belonging to a community is underestimated in its contribution to wellbeing. Dr. Nicolas Epley, a professor of behavioral science at the Chicago Booth School of Business, has conducted numerous studies demonstrating how crucial social connection is to our happiness and how our expectations from social interactions are consistently wrong. Whether in a waiting room, a museum, a commuter train or an airplane, study participants consistently predict that they will be happier if they are left alone –to read, to enjoy the museum, or to complete a work task. By assigning participants to different conditions, invariably, those who interacted with others in even the smallest way – a smile, direct eye contact-- were markedly happier after the interaction than before.

Dr. Epley shared a story from a woman who worked for the Metro in Chicago. She affirmed Epley's studies by relating that the Metro, in response to commuter demand, was adding quiet cars. He asked her if they were also going to try the opposite by adding chatty cars. She responded that they used to have something like them, the bar cars that went out to the farthest Chicago suburbs. They had to abandon them because they were somewhat of a safety issue. Apparently, they were too crowded. So, was it the liquor or the company that made those cars too crowded? Mull, the author of the friendship article, maintains that it's the company. And the science supports her conclusion. When complete strangers eat chocolate together, they report higher happiness scores. It is safe to conclude that just about any experience is better when it is shared.

Think how happy you will be when you are reunited with your communities without face masks and social distancing. In the meanwhile, live a little and make a social connection. It needn't be big—a smile, direct eye contact. I let my dog Izzy do the ice breaking for me. We have lots and lots of outer circle friends. I know all of the dogs' names and all of their quirks. I don't know any of the people by name but seeing them with their dogs never fails to make my day.

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Patricia M. Fuller has dedicated the last 20+ years to designing and delivering wellness programs. Her events earn consistently excellent ratings for her holistic approach and her real world application.

Prior to concentrating in wellness, Pat taught accounting and auditing as an adjunct professor at the University of Tampa. She earned her CPA designation in 1992 as a senior associate for Coopers & Lybrand. She has a Masters in Business Administration from the University of Utah.

Pat has a PhD in holistic nutrition. In 2010, she was board certified by the Holistic Nutrition Credentialing Board. Her areas of research include stress management and eating habits. She is a Certified Wellcoach and a member of the Institute of Coaching. She is an annual attendee to The Harvard Medical School Conference, Coaching In Leadership & Healthcare.

Have a Question? Email it to Dr. Pat: [pfuller@bks-partners.com](mailto:pfuller@bks-partners.com)

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