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Too Little Friendship?

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Many of us feel we over-work. According to the best estimate, 2 million Britons now put in at least 60 hours a week at work. That does not include commuting time, which averages another three quarters of an hour a day, and much more in the South-East.

This is, of course, a choice by people. But it is not so clear that it is a good one.

My research group is looking at a question that eventually Western society will have to face more openly. Are we over-investing in work and under-investing in friendship? I suspect we are.

How many good friends would you say you have? The answer seems to matter quite profoundly. It influences your body's health as well as your mind's contentment.

Social scientists have for some years studied the links between people's social relationships and their wellbeing. According to the research, these are probably the single greatest cause of happiness.

Of course it is not rocket science to say that men and women like friends. We all have experiences of that, and know anecdotes about others.

Can research be done in a more systematic way? One method is to give little beepers to those in your survey or your experiment. A researcher called Larson recently ran a project in which subjects were beeped at random times of the day. Each time, the subjects were asked to report how they were feeling. Being with friends was marked by people as giving the greatest sense of happiness. Next came being with members of your family. The lowest happiness score came from being alone. This pattern held good for all age groups, and the happiness induced by friends was particularly large for older retired men and women.

Researchers are still trying to find out exactly how social relationships lead to feelings of joy and wellbeing.

In social encounters we all receive important non-verbal signals, particularly smiles. Human beings need smiles. It is known that babies respond to cheery faces and that happiness is probably the first emotion to be recognized by infants. This seems, in fact, to be innate rather than learned.

Close friends matter particularly. Research suggests that to get those it is necessary to engage in a high level of self-disclosure. One study of students, for example, found that having lots of friends did not prevent loneliness if the subject spent all his or her time talking about impersonal topics like music or sport. It is by sharing our views about ourselves that we win over truly rewarding friendships.

Men and women are not the same. Women's friendships are built on higher self-disclosure and support. Men's friendships more often revolve around activities. Yet there is even more to it than that. Intriguingly, for either gender, the best predictor of not being lonely is the frequency of interaction with women.

As usual, research finds a powerful link between mind and body. We know that people with strong social support and intimate friendships visit the doctor less than others. Friends really do make you healthier and get you to live longer. Students who say they are in love are known to have a higher white blood cell count than others.

Even being friendly with your dog or cat makes a contribution; it reduces anxiety and heart disease. Controlled research projects on those with and without pets has discovered that a pat a day keeps the doctor away. One Australian survey discovered that 11% of dog owners were on medication compared to 19% of those with no pets.

Above all, relationships seem to provide a kind of "buffering". People under stress respond strongly to social support and being esteemed by others.

Of course we all have to invest in our human capital, and to make a living. But it is worth knowing that investing in friends also has a tremendous rate of return.