People are good for our health - our emotional and physical health. In a sense, people around us, the people we are closest to, are all the "vitamins and minerals" of the psyche keeping us mentally whole and healthy.

The worst punishment that can be inflicted upon a prisoner is solitary confinement. The deprivation of human contact is almost as severe as lack of food or shelter from the elements. Contact with fellow humans is a deep and lasting need, and the nature of the contact affects our emotional well being.

Relationships - intimate and casual - affect the way we feel about ourselves and others. Are people with many social ties more likely or less likely to get sick? Social support has guaranteed our survival not only as individuals but also as a species.

Thousands of years ago, our ancestors realized that they could better protect themselves against predators - human and animals - by organizing themselves into clans, tribes, villages, cities and even nations.

They developed a system of language and symbols that enabled them to communicate with one another and advance the common good.

Through the years, humans have populated the habitable earth - a fact no other living species has duplicated. Even modern day sayings like "there's strength in numbers," "two heads are better than one," "one for all, all for one."

It is thought that people who are married seem to live longer and have fewer health problems than people who are single, divorced, or widowed. All of these reasons make sense. But another reason for the marriage bonus emerged with the advent of psycho-neuro-immunology - the study of how emotions influence the immune system, and the nervous system.

Just as exercise conditions muscles to handle heavier loads, social interactions condition the immune system to help defend us against illness.

More recently, studies have shown that social isolation triggers the release of stress hormones, which not only impede immune system function but also raise heart rate, interferes with sugar metabolism. This stimulates feelings of depression and anxiety according to Dr. W. Spiegel M.D. "Stress hormones ebb and flow," but when stress becomes chronic, these hormones remain at consistently high levels, impairing the body's ability to heal and stay well.

Having well developed social bonds help dam the flood of stress hormones allowing the body to cope more effectively and heal more effectively. This helps explain why the people with the most social ties were least likely to develop colds and other maladies. Human relationships are essential to emotional health, closeness to others brings happiness. It is no coincidence that some severe mental illnesses, autism in children, schizophrenia in children and adults, and very severe emotional depression are all characterized by an extreme withdrawal from others.

Have faith in your health. Regular church attendance provides a real sense of community, long term friendships and feelings of security in our rapidly changing and fast paced world. It can even lower your blood pressure. Regular attendance to a church, synagogue or other places of worship has many physical and emotional benefits. It gives people social support, a sense of fellowship and friendship.

Doctor Stanbrook Ph.D., suggests that church attendance gives people a moral and ethical framework which helps them handle everyday stress. And further your attendance provides many
community service opportunities. "These are indications that helping others, makes you happier and healthier."

A few years ago, at the special Olympics in Seattle, nine contestants all physically and mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the sound of the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry.

They all slowed and looked back. Then they all went back - every one of them. One little girl with Downs Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "this will make you better." Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood up and gave them the biggest "standing ovation" ever heard at that stadium and the cheering went on for minutes.

People who were there are still telling the story. Because deep down we know this one thing: What matters most in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing down and changing our own course.

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