

RE-STUMP

with Hearten Up

FOUNDATIONS OF GOOD MENTAL HEALTH



RE-STUMP

with Hearten Up

When an old house loses its strength and begins to get a little wonky and uneven, the foundations need to be reset or the whole thing will lose its form and shape.

Residential foundations of yesteryear weren't steel-reinforced concrete, but wooden stumps. They were strong and sturdy for a number of years, but aging would catch up with them and new foundations would need to be laid.

It's not stretching the analogy to liken our mental health to a home from the early-to-mid twentieth century. We learn how to do our best from the people who raise us, and as we make our way in the world, we might also find our foundations a little off-balance.

Our Re-Stump program takes a helicopter view of the four foundations of good mental health:

- Good sleep and rest
- Good nutrition
- Good exercise and movement, and
- Good connections.

We need all four to hold ourselves steady, and build our best life upon these foundations.

Personally, I've struggled with all four of these foundations at various points, but I've also felt like I was doing really well with some of them at different times – but never all at once! I couldn't seem to get them all in good shape at the same time.

After burning out and having a mental health breakdown in 2016, I learned that it's ok not to be nailing life. We are all human, and we are all imperfect by design. Shooting the lights out of this adventure called life is the stuff of fairy tales and movies, not the real world.

I'm doing much better these days and have learned there's no real finish line for this stuff. I know I'll need to press reset on these foundations at different points along the way, and I'm ok with that.

My hope is that in sharing what I've learned in recent years, and continue to work on getting better at, you might pick up some knowledge, habits, or ideas to equip you for the re-stumping you may need to do at some stage.

Learning from the past and each other is the very definition of collective growth, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share with you and learn from you during our time doing this program together.

Be human, not concrete.

Joel.

Joel Clapham

Founder & Chief Mental Health Champ

Hearten Up

SLEEP HAS A BI-DIRECTIONAL CONNECTION WITH OUR MENTAL HEALTH.

A long-held view is that sleep problems are a symptom of mental ill-health and mental illness. However, a body of evidence is emerging that suggests this is a bidirectional relationship, with sleep having a much more influential role as both a cause and consequence of mental health problems.

Mental health problems often make it harder to sleep properly. At the same time, poor sleep, including insomnia, can influence mood and emotional reactivity, as well as contributing to the development and impact of mental illness, including the risk of suicidal ideas or behaviours.

Around 75% of depressed people show symptoms of insomnia, and many people with depression also suffer from excessive daytime sleepiness and hypersomnia (sleeping too much).

There is also a strong correlation between anxiety disorders and sleeping problems. Anxiety can lead to hyperarousal, where the mind is racing and can't switch off.

The existence of sleep problems may become an added source of worry, creating anticipatory anxiety that makes it harder to fall and stay asleep...

This becomes a vicious cycle, where poor sleep worsens anxiety and depression, which then reduce our quality of sleep, and round and round and round we go...

Dr Hanna Hensen, of independent research institute Neuroscience Research Australia, says around 40% of Australians are not getting enough sleep each night, negatively impacting the function of key organs in the body.

"It is during sleep several brain processes take place, memory consolidation occurs, and neural connections are strengthened," said Dr Hensen.

"Sleep is also an important time for processing information we have accumulated across the day, and inadequate or poor sleep can have a direct impact on mental health effecting depression, anxiety and emotional instability."

"A good night's sleep can improve mental health, general wellbeing, and boost workplace productivity."
– Dr Hanna Hensen, sleep researcher

QUALITY OR QUANTITY?

It's an age-old debate: how much sleep do we actually need? While the general rule of thumb – and objective – for many people is 8 hours sleep each night, more research findings suggest that our focus should be on the quality of sleep, regardless of how long we actually sleep.

"We found that poor sleep quality is linked to worse functioning regardless of how long a person has slept for," says Dr Yu Sun Bin, a research fellow at the Charles Perkins Centre at the University of Sydney. "In fact, people who sleep six or fewer hours functioned just as well as those who sleep six to eight hours, provided their sleep was of good quality."

Those with poor quality sleep of eight plus hours had the poorest functioning overall, researchers found. Co-researcher Nick Glozier, from the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Centre, said: "This research shows that, more than anything, we need a good night's sleep, not a long night's sleep."

SLEEP HYGIENE

Given the two-way connection between sleep and mental health, it means we have something we can focus on and improve however we can. With that, let's look at our own sleep routine and habits and seeing what improvements we may be able to make.

Health professionals across the board agree on the many useful things we can do to improve our sleep hygiene, and therefore our quality of sleep.

The sleeping environment

- Bedrooms are for beds. Try not to use your bedroom for anything other than sleeping and sex, so that your body comes to associate bed with sleep. Try not to use your bedroom for watching TV, eating, reading, working on a laptop – at least during the night hours.
- No heating appliances in your bedroom – if you do have them, switch them off an hour before bedtime. A drop in body temperature is a biological cue for our body to get sleepy.
- Sleep in as dark a room as you can. Cool, dark rooms are ideal for good quality sleep.
- Keep your phone outside your bedroom – on a bench or in a drawer in another room is preferable. If you need alarms to help wake up, try a clock-radio rather than your phone.
- Put notifications on silent, even if you leave your ring volume up for emergency calls.

Bed time

- Be aware of the impact of food, coffee, alcohol, and tobacco. General guidance is no caffeine after mid-afternoon, no food or alcohol within two hours of bedtime, and no tobacco within an hour.
- Turn off the TV/computer, smart devices and overhead room lighting an hour before.
- Go to bed at the same time each night, and waking at the same time each morning (within 30 minutes either side).
- Have a pre-bed routine, so our body can recognise these actions and begin to switch off the more we do it (eg. dishwasher on, 5 mins breathing exercises, clean teeth, lights out, bed).

Can't sleep?

- If you're still awake 20 minutes after going to bed, get up and do something calm/boring until you feel sleepy, then try again. Don't do anything too interesting, as this will wake you up!

Finding the best routines and bedroom arrangements might take a while and some trial and error, but the more regular and predictable our sleep routine is, the better quality of sleep we will have.

Resources

- Scott AJ, Webb TL, Rowse G. "Does improving sleep lead to better mental health? A protocol for a meta-analytic review of randomised controlled trials" *BMJ Open* 2017 <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/7/9/e016873>
- Bernert, R.A., Kim, J.S., Iwata, N.G. et al. "Sleep Disturbances as an Evidence-Based Suicide Risk Factor". *Curr Psychiatry Rep* 17, 15 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-015-0554-4>
- Bishop, T. M., Simons, K. V., King, D. A., & Pigeon, W. R. (2016). Sleep and Suicide in Older Adults: An Opportunity for Intervention. *Clinical therapeutics*, 38(11), 2332–2339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clinthera.2016.09.015>
- "What has sleep got to do with mental health? Everything." *Neuroscience Research Australia*, 2017 <https://www.neura.edu.au/news/sleep-got-mental-health-everything/>
- Lallukka, T., Sivertsen, B., Kronholm, E., Bin, Y. S., Overland, S., & Glozier, N. (2018). "Association of sleep duration and sleep quality with the physical, social, and emotional functioning among Australian adults". *Sleep health*, 4(2), 194-200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2017.11.006>

The World Health Organisation has long said that 'there is no health without mental health', and our diet is now a recognised modifiable factor in the prevention and treatment of mental illness.

The Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists' clinical practice guidelines describe lifestyle factors, such as what we eat and drink, as 'essentially non-negotiable' and a foundation treatment for mood disorders, such as depression and anxiety.

Deakin University's Food and Mood Centre says that 'physical and mental health should be considered two sides of the same coin' and that food and exercise are just as relevant for mental health as they are for physical health.

The brain accounts for around 20% of our total daily energy requirements, and poor diet has been linked to:

- hyperactivity, aggression, disobedience
- Low concentration and fatigue
- Slower brain development
- Iron deficiency, which impacts learning and memory.

Nutrient deficiencies have been associated with mental health conditions including depression and anxiety.

A QUICK FIX IS ANYTHING BUT A FIX

Just as our diet impacts on our mental health, poor mental health can also influence our dietary behaviours and see us chasing our tail. Our brains can crave quick sources of energy when we're tired, and stress and uncomfortable emotions often see us reach for sweet and rich foods – comfort food.

And while we might get a quick burst of energy and feel better quickly, this is only a short-term gain, and we'll spiral back down again quite quickly. Next time you're at a children's party with lots of sweet and sugary food, take note of the decline in energy, focus and behaviour of the kids a couple of hours after the party ends...

FRESH OR PACKAGED?

The 20th century saw a marked increase in the consumption of sugars, snack foods, take-away foods and high-energy foods, while consumption of nutrient and fibre-dense foods decreased significantly. Studies have also shown those with severe mental illness have higher amounts of pro-inflammatory foods, such as ultra-processed foods.

Greater consumption of processed foods means that many children and young people don't have the necessary nutritional building blocks for optimal health and growth – less than 1% of children and young people between ages 2 and 18 consume the recommended amount of vegetables each day.

Processed foods are best avoided as much as possible. They usually have high levels of unhealthy fats, sugars and refined carbohydrates, as well as artificial sweeteners and emulsifiers, which are increasingly shown as having a negative impact on our wellbeing, including our gut and healthy bacteria.

That said, frozen and tinned vegetables and fruits (without added sugar or syrup) can be just as beneficial as fresh produce. This means those cans of kidney beans and asparagus spears we all seem to have at the back of our cupboards are good for more than just donating to food drives!

WHAT ARE 'GOOD' FOODS?

When it comes to our mental health, there is no one specific diet that's recommended.

Studies of the 'Mediterranean Diet' show it can treat even severe clinical depression, and a wide range of international research has found following a healthy, traditional diet, can lead to a reduced risk of depression and anxiety. Japanese, Scandinavian and a paleo-like diet have also been found to be greatly beneficial to both physical and mental health.

A healthy, traditional diet is one that includes plenty of **wholegrains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and healthy fats from fish, nuts, and seeds and olive oils**. There is widespread expert consensus that these foods are especially beneficial, as they are rich in important nutrients such as folate, magnesium, vitamins and zinc, which all have a positive effect on body and brain functions.

It's also important we make sure we're getting enough protein, which is essential not only for healthy and lean muscles, but also amino acids, which make up the chemicals your brain needs to regulate your thoughts and feelings. It also helps keep you feeling fuller for longer.

Protein is found in lean meat, **fish, eggs, cheese, legumes, nuts and seeds**. **Green vegetables like spinach, broccoli and kale** are good sources of plant protein.

MEAL PREP – THE MAGIC BULLET

With lives that feel busy and often overwhelming, it's so easy to feel like we don't have time to prepare healthy food for ourselves. It's no coincidence that as our lives became busier and busier during the 20th century, 'fast food' and take-away exploded from being a once-in-a-while treat, to an entire industry and way of life. Some supermarkets now carry more ready-made meals than they do of the individual and fresh ingredients for cooking.

But we can take a leaf out of this book and apply it to our own routines, through preparing meals ahead of time.

Try and find a few hours each week to prepare and cook healthy meals and snacks you can quickly grab or put together on those busier days. Many people spend an afternoon each weekend cooking bulk meals and putting them in the fridge for the week, but that's not possible for everyone.

A useful tip is whenever you do cook, make more than you need and put the leftovers in the fridge or freezer for those occasions where time is against you, and you'll soon have some quick meals on hand, and less temptation to order in.

For snacks, cut up some vegetable sticks to have with some hommus or a natural peanut butter. Boil some eggs. Make some quiches in a cupcake tray and keep them in the fridge. The internet is loaded with plenty of quick and healthy snack ideas to help make things easier – and healthier – for you.

Try and prepare your lunch and snacks the day before, and take them with you to work and whenever you're not at home. Lunchboxes aren't just for kids!

HYDRATE

Water is defined as an essential nutrient because it is required in amounts that exceed the body's ability to produce it.

If you don't drink enough fluid, you may find it difficult to concentrate or think clearly. You might also start to feel constipated, which is a pretty crap feeling (sorry).

Drinking plenty of fluids, especially water, prevents dehydration – a common cause of headaches, tiredness, and 'brain fog' that can affect our ability to concentrate.

There are all sorts of calculations and figures to help you determine how much water you 'should' drink each day, but the general view is that **adults need 2-3 litres per day to remain healthily hydrated.**

This sounds like a lot, and if you don't drink much water at all, it's a big increase that'll initially have you using the facilities more frequently. But your body will soon adjust to the increase and start to harness this much healthier level of water intake.

Drinking water regularly throughout the day is an easy, effective step to take in our efforts to be as mentally healthy as possible. Start with a glass of water first thing in the morning. Keep a water bottle in your bag, on your desk, beside your bed, next to the couch, in the car and even carry one with you whenever you're out and about. Try to make sure you drink the equivalent of two to three glasses of water between meals.

Don't rely on being thirsty as a sign you need water. Regular sips and mouthfuls is best. To keep an eye on your body's hydration, check the colour of your urine. The lighter the better, and the darker it is, the closer you are to being dehydrated.

Just as hydration is crucial for athletes, it is just as crucial for our brains.

Resources

Looking through the lens at how food can improve our mood
<https://foodandmoodcentre.com.au/2021/04/looking-through-the-lens-at-how-food-can-improve-our-mood/>

Diet and Mental Health
<https://foodandmoodcentre.com.au/2016/07/diet-and-mental-health/>

How are nutrition and mental health linked?
<https://beyou.edu.au/fact-sheets/wellbeing/nutrition-and-mental-health>

Nutritional psychiatry: Your brain on food
<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626>

How to manage your mood with food
<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/about-food-and-mood/>

Urine colour chart
<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/urine-colour-chart>

How Important Is Water & Hydration To Mental Health?
<https://www.aifc.com.au/how-important-is-water-hydration-to-mental-health/>

Exercise benefits not only your physical health, but also your mental health. Put simply, research shows that people who exercise regularly have better mental health and emotional wellbeing, and lower rates of mental illness.

Exercise and movement releases endorphins and serotonin that improve your mood, and it stimulates the parts of the brain responsible for memory and learning.

Aerobic exercises including jogging, swimming, cycling, walking, gardening, and dancing, as well as yoga and pilates, are proven to reduce anxiety and depression.

“The benefits of exercise on mental health include: improved memory, focus and thinking skills; improved sleep; reduced stress and anxiety; and prevention against depression and other mental health conditions”, says Anita Hobson-Powell, CEO of Exercise and Sports Science Australia.

Physical activity is not only an effective part of treatment for anyone with mental health challenges, but it can also protect against future episodes of depression. One study found that 12% of cases of depression could have been prevented by just one hour of exercise a week.

The physical benefits of exercise are also important for people with mental ill-health, because people with mental health issues are at a higher risk of suffering from chronic physical conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis and asthma. People with serious mental illness typically live between 10 and 32 years less than the general population. Around 80% of this higher mortality rate can be attributed to the much higher rates of physical illnesses, such as cardiovascular and respiratory diseases and cancer experienced by this population.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

There's no need to feel daunted if exercise isn't something you spend much or any time doing. Even small amounts of exercise get you out in the world, help to reduce any feelings of loneliness and isolation, and put you in touch with other people.

Australian guidelines recommend adults do at least 30 minutes of moderate to intensive physical activity on most or all days of the week. Some ways you can incorporate exercise into the day include:

- Walk around the block before you shower in the morning
- Walk your kids to school
- Go around the supermarket a little faster, and consciously push the trolley with semi-tensed arms
- Get off your tram, train or bus one stop earlier and walk the rest of the way
- Use the stairs rather than the elevator
- While waiting for the kettle to boil, do 10/20/30 bodyweight squats a wall sit for 30 seconds
- Instead of meeting a friend at a café, grab a take-away coffee and go for a walk together
- Join your local parkrun, which is held at 8am every Saturday in parks all around the world. parkrun is open to everyone and you don't even need to 'run' – you can walk the whole way if you want! The supportive social atmosphere of parkrun is one of its best assets.
- See if any local community centres offer affordable exercise groups.
- If you have private health insurance, you might be able to claim sports or gym membership fees.

You don't need to find a solid chunk of 30 minutes each day – 3 x 10-minute walks are believed to be as equally useful as one 30-minute walk.

THE 'SECRET DESK WORKOUT'

Fitbit suggests some desk-based exercises to do throughout the day that can help you strengthen your muscles and improve flexibility, without being the sweaty, panting person in the office at lunchtime.

- 1. Seated Secret Core:** Sit tall in your chair with your pelvis slightly tilted forward. Pull your belly button up and in. Remember to brace your core (imagine getting ready for someone to hit your belly). Hold for 10 to 15 seconds, then relax for a breath or two. Repeat five times.
- 2. Marching Core:** Move forward in your seat so that you're sitting on the edge of it. Engage your core and lean slightly back while keeping your back straight. If that's challenging enough, hold there for 10 to 15 seconds. You can make this harder by lifting one foot off the ground at a time as well. Relax and repeat five times.
- 3. Hand Behind Back Chest/Shoulder Opener:** Sitting at your desk can make you hunch forward slightly, which tightens up your shoulders and chest muscles. To counteract this, sit in your chair and place one hand on the small of your back, palm facing out. Press the back of your hand into your back while attempting to pull your elbow and shoulder backwards. Hold for 10 seconds, repeat 3 times, then replicate on the other side.
- 4. Shoulder Blade Pencil Pinches:** Think of this as an instant posture improver. Sit up tall, as if you're balancing a glass of water on your head. Engage your core, then pinch your shoulder blades together (imagine squeezing a pencil between them). Relax and repeat 20 times.
- 5. Seated Torso Twist:** Sit as tall as possible (pretend there's a string on the top of your head and someone is pulling it up). Inhale, and when you exhale, twist to one side. While twisted, take five deep breaths, trying to twist a little deeper with each exhale. Repeat on the other side.
- 6. Million Dollar Quad Pulses:** Sit up as tall as possible and squeeze your inner thighs together (imagine you have a million dollar bill between your legs and you don't want to let it drop). Straighten one leg and pulse it two to three inches up, maintaining the thigh squeeze the entire time. Pulse 20 times, then repeat with the other leg.
- 7. Million Dollar March:** Start out the same way as the previous move (sitting tall, squeezing thighs together). Straighten one leg, engage your quad, flex your foot, then return to floor. Repeat on the other side, keeping thighs squeezed together the entire time. Alternate legs, doing 10 times on each side.

Whether you do incidental exercise such as suggested here, or something more structured and competitive in a group setting, the key thing to focus on is moving more and sitting less.

Every day.

Resources

Physical activity and exercise guidelines for all Australians

<https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/physical-activity-and-exercise/physical-activity-and-exercise-guidelines-for-all-australians>

Mental health and exercise – the vital link

<https://exerciseright.com.au/mental-health-exercise-vital-link/>

Physical activity and health

<https://wayahead.org.au/get-the-facts/physical-activity-and-health/>

Physical health of people with mental illness

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/physical-health-of-people-with-mental-illness>

Physical health and mental illness

<https://www.ranzcp.org/practice-education/guidelines-and-resources-for-practice/physical-health/physical-health-and-mental-illness>

“A deep sense of love and belonging is an irresistible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don’t function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.”

– Brene Brown

Humans are genetically programmed to be social and connected. Very few of us could truly survive on our own, and it’s just as true now as it was in the time of our ancestors, who established villages and communities both for resource concentration and trade purposes, as well as the sense of connections and community that is so critical for our emotional nourishment.

The follow-on from this is that the feeling of loneliness would be a sign of risk: that we were not with our group, and therefore literally at risk of potential danger. We need other people around us, and we need differing degrees of connection and interaction, all to sustain our own wellbeing.

Close relationships with family, friends, and our wider community give us feelings of happiness, security, support, and a greater sense of purpose. Being connected to others is important for our mental and physical wellbeing and can be a protective factor against anxiety and depression.

THE SOCIAL BIOME

Did you know you have a social biome? Jeffrey Hall, professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas, and Andy Merolla, professor of communication at UC Santa Barbara, say we all do.

Following their 2019 study that examined the social interactions and subsequent reports of wellbeing among 400 people, Hall and Merolla said our social biome is ‘the individual ecosystem of relationships and interactions that shapes our emotional, psychological and physical health’.

Underpinning the social biome concept is idea that just like food has calories, social interactions also have a nourishment value for our wellbeing. And like food, variety and quality are more important than quantity. A healthy social biome could involve a deep conversation with a close friend, chit-chat with a barista in the morning, SMSing a funny photo to siblings, an end-of-the-day debrief with a partner, and a nod of thanks to someone who lets us off the train before they get in.

All interactions, big and small, make up our social biome. And yes, the current pandemic has severely damaged most of ours, which wouldn’t be earth-shattering news to anyone.

Expanding on the social biome, Robin Dunbar, emeritus professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of Oxford, says beyond our own circles, we are all part ever-extending network called the family, the community, the nation, the globe, which is all highly interconnected.

This network can bring incredible benefits, says Dunbar, pointing to a raft of epidemiological papers in the past 15 years showing that “the best single predictor for your psychological wellbeing and health, for your physical wellbeing and health – even for your risk of dying – is the number and quality of friendships that you have”.

THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

Loneliness can affect us through abnormal sleep patterns, headaches, physical pains, depression, lack of energy, loss of appetite and more.

In an interview with The Guardian in 2016, the late John Cacioppo, long-time director of the University of Chicago's Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience, discussed the prevalence of loneliness in his research:

"The incidence ranges from 20% to 40% of people; in our own research it comes in at around 26% of the population. That is one in four people who regularly feel lonely.

Then, what is the impact on health if you feel chronically lonely? When you allow for all the other factors, you find that chronic loneliness increases the odds of an early death by 20%.

And then we studied how it makes you more vulnerable. What is happening in the brains of lonely people, at the endocrinological level, at the genetic level and what is that doing to immunity and resistance to disease, what genes are being turned on and turned off, when the brain goes into this self-preservation mode?

For one thing, we found that loneliness decreases the effectiveness of sleep. You have sleep fragmentation and you always wake up tired. The cumulative wear and tear is greater if you are lonely than if you are not."

People who become lonelier over time begin to trust others less, which creates a vicious cycle of loneliness and social isolation.

ALONE TIME CAN BE REALLY GOOD FOR US

"The strongest association with global wellbeing was how people felt when they were alone", says Hall, of his and Merollo's research.

"Alone time is actually a part of a healthy biome. When we feel sustained by just enough meaningful conversations – even one a day – and by just enough pleasant small talk, then we also feel nourished by time spent alone."

The study also found contentment while being alone is an important part of a balanced social diet.

"You need to be quiet, meditate, nap, chill, whatever you do," Hall said. "It's alone time, but it's about having a balanced system. It's not just that more social time is always better. It's about ratios. It's about proportionality."

SMALL TALK – BIG IMPACT

For those of us who find small talk quite bothersome and annoying, Hall and Merolla ask us to reconsider this view, saying that small talk is more far more beneficial than we might credit it.

Short and sharp moments of kind interaction, however trivial or banal the subject matter might feel, can have a powerful impact for the small amount of effort they require, and tend to be really good for mood regulation, says Hall.

"Small talk is disparaged as being awful, but in some sense, checking in with another person and letting them know that you're glad that you're sharing a space with them is absolutely critical to a sense of community, and to our sense of social nutrition."

TYPES OF GOOD CONNECTIONS

Intimate

- People who love and care for us, such as family and friends.

Relational

- People we see regularly and share an interest with, such as workmates, other parents of our kids' group hobbies, or staff at our favourite café.

Collective

- People with whom we share a group membership or affiliation, such as fellow supporters of our favourite sports team, or die-hard fans of a particular TV series.

How many meaningful, long-term relationships do you have in all these three areas?

FOSTERING GOOD CONNECTIONS

If we feel we don't have enough good quality connections in our life, there are two ways we can go about improving this. One is more immediate, and one involves stepping outside our existing comfort zone.

The first way we can improve connections is to try and better connect with people we already know, such as, family, friends or neighbours. We could give someone a call or email them and say we'd like to catch up and stay in closer contact than we have recently. Most people will respond favourably and with equal enthusiasm and we could organise a coffee or meal, go for a walk, or see a movie.

If geography is an issue, writing and posting letters can be a fantastic way to really show someone we care, given how infrequently we do this anymore.

When was the last time you received a postcard or letter? How did you feel? Give that feeling to someone else by sending them one.

The second way we could improve connections is by looking for groups or clubs that we have an interest in. Local councils and community centres usually have a directory of groups with common interests such as cooking, family history, board games, etc, and most local libraries run a book club or two (even online these days).

Team sports are another great way to connect and form new friendships. If you have an interest in a particular sport, get in touch with a local team or club and offer to volunteer in the canteen or on the BBQ at the next game. Willing helpers are always needed and welcome, even if you don't have any other connection to the club.

Initiatives such as Neighbour Day are another option to meet or better connect with those who live around us.

THE LADDER OF COMMUNICATION

We can think of the different methods of communication available to us as rungs on a ladder, says Hall.

- The lowest rung is browsing social media, and you might want to skip that one, he says. “It’s probably no better in terms of feeling connected than being totally alone, so it’s not serving a social function.”
- The next rung up is direct messaging a group – sharing memes or news on WhatsApp or Facebook.
- Then direct messages to people you want to keep in touch with. “When something you’ve just seen reminds you of a friend, text and say: ‘Hey, I was just thinking of you.’ Use your naturally functioning social alert system to direct your behaviour, rather than just forgetting about it,” he says.
- The next rung is phone calls and video chat. Something we’ve all become much more accustomed (even if not comfortable) with in recent times.

**Top of the ladder is, of course, face-to-face conversation.
It is the most nourishing of all forms of social contact.**

Resources

Connecting Everyday Talk and Time Alone to Global Well-Being.

Jeffrey A. Hall and Andy J. Merolla. Human Communication Research (First published: December 6, 2019) <https://academic.oup.com/hcr/article-abstract/46/1/86/5664814>

The social biome: how to build nourishing friendships – and banish loneliness

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/mar/24/the-social-biome-how-to-build-nourishing-friendships-and-banish-loneliness>

7 Ways Loneliness (And Connectedness) Affect Mental Health

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2018/10/30/7-ways-loneliness-and-connectedness-affect-mental-health/>

Social connection boosts health, even when you’re isolated

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/feeling-it/202003/social-connection-boosts-health-even-when-youre-isolated>

The value of maintaining social connections for mental health in older people

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(19\)30253-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(19)30253-1/fulltext)

Connections matter

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/older-people/connections-matter>

Connect for mental wellbeing

<https://livingwell.org.au/well-being/five-ways-to-mental-wellbeing/connect-with-others/>

Strong social connections, better mental health

<https://www.openminds.org.au/news/strong-social-connections-better-mental-health>

Strong relationships, strong health

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/Strong-relationships-strong-health>