

[El Dia del Amor y la Amistad](#)

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I am spending this weekend with dear friends in Mexico City where February 14th is celebrated as El Día del Amor y la Amistad, the “day of love and friendship.”



[Photo Credit](#)

And earlier this week, two friends from different parts of the world sent me emails on the significant impact of friendships on mental health and wellbeing over our lifetimes. Of course, volumes could be written on the subject. Here are just five highlights that stand out for me from these recent reads.

1. Friendships are baked into our evolution. In her book, [Friendship: The Evolution, Biology and Extraordinary Power of Life's Fundamental Bonds](#), author Lydia Denworth traces the practice of friendship back to the African savannah and the protective value of the pack when the lions came hunting. It is very clear that baboons and monkeys do better when they are together. [So do humans](#). Across a range of primates and other mammals, including horses, elephants and dolphins, males with strong friendships have improved reproductive success and females with the strongest, most enduring friendships experience less stress, higher infant survival, and live longer.

2. Hard wired nature of peer presence on adolescent risk taking. Virtually all parents of teens can recount a time when their kid did something in the company of peers that they would never have done alone. [Risk taking goes up when teens are together](#). Adolescents are four times more likely to get into car accidents when with peers compared to when driving alone, are more likely to commit crimes together, and are more likely to experiment with alcohol and other drugs with friends. Temple University psychologist [Laurence Steinberg](#) and neuroscientist [Jason Chein](#) have conducted a series of studies that help us understand how this happens. Their research reveals that adolescent brains – for humans and mice – are hard wired to be especially sensitive to peer influence. Imaging studies reveal brain activation and elevated reward-seeking in the presence of peers, which translates into more risk taking.

3. What about adult men and friends? More and more studies are suggesting that adult men are at

particular risk for being socially disconnected. The UK's Movember organization [reports](#) that one in ten men cannot recall the last time they made contact with their friends. And 19% of men over 55 said they had no close friend in whom they could confide anything personal. These reports are especially serious given the findings from the [Harvard Grant Study](#). For seventy-five years this study has followed the lives of 724 men who collectively proclaim friendships to be the strongest predictors of happiness, with quality trumping quantity.

4. Social Isolation and Loneliness are Lethal. Across the lifespan, social isolation is correlated with [increased risk](#) for self-harming behaviors, including suicide. And later in life, as I referenced in a previous Five on Friday, [Grow Old With Me](#), social isolation is a serious risk for older adults, resulting in higher rates of psychological distress and [depressive symptoms](#). Both social isolation and loneliness are associated with a higher risk of death in older adults. In fact, socially isolated individuals have the same risk of death as people who smoke fifteen cigarettes a day.

5. Conversely, good friends are good for our health. Our understanding of the ways in which social connection is critical to our health, including our mental health and well-being is steadily increasing. Across the continuum of human experience - from developing a sense of self to experiencing meaning and purpose in life, from having a friend's shoulder to cry on to having a friend to laugh with - good friendships have the potential to enhance resilience, protect against mental ill health and support recovery when mental illness strikes. And increasingly we are able to see in real time the impact of friendships on the brain in imaging studies, on stress hormones, blood pressure, and in other biological measures of health and functioning.

So on this Valentine's Day from Mexico, the day of love and friendship, and in celebration of the mental health benefits of good friendships, ¡Feliz día del amor y la amistad!