

How casual daily interactions protect your health

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Close relationships with family and friends, we know, are important for our health and well-being. But what about the people who make up our broader social networks: the parents at school drop-off, the neighbor down the street or that colleague in another department who always makes you laugh?

While research on the benefits of social connections has generally focused on the importance of “strong ties,” or the intimate relationships we have with family and close friends, a growing body of research is shedding light on the hidden benefits of casual acquaintances, too. Surprisingly, these “weak ties” (that funny colleague, for example) can serve important functions such as boosting physical and psychological health and buffering against stress and loneliness, researchers have found.

Weak ties can be online acquaintances such as Facebook friends. They may also include someone you see frequently but don’t know well — a gym buddy, a member of your church or synagogue, or someone you see at a regular volunteer activity.

“While most people can only keep up a few strong ties because of the time and investment they require, weak ties can number in the hundreds,” says Karen Fingerman, a professor of human development and family sciences at University of Texas at Austin, who has been studying the impact of such “peripheral” ties for the past 20 years.