

Spring clean your social life

ASU Assistant Professor Mengya Xia on clearing clutter, nurturing connections and building healthier relationships

By Jennifer Moore, ASU News

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Spring: a season of growth, warmer weather and perhaps a case of the sniffles. But as much as the flowers are budding and blooming, so should — hopefully — our social connections. Or are they shriveling like a plant in drought?

Healthy interpersonal relationships, [according to the U.S. surgeon general](#), are not just for fun, but are crucial for living — so much so that they are predictors of physical health and longevity.

Social isolation and poor-quality relationships are linked to, for example, a higher risk of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, inflammation and premature mortality. Correspondingly, people who feel socially connected are over twice as likely to report being in good health, have better disease management and, if they are children or adolescents, get better grades in school.

So how do we nourish our social relationships, or — if necessary — weed out the bad? And how can we sow the seeds for high-quality connections?

[Mengya Xia](#) is an assistant professor in the [T. Denny Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics](#) and a relationship researcher leading the [DREAMS Lab](#). She has previously researched “social connection constellations,” a novel framework for understanding how different aspects of our social lives shape well-being.

The idea is that, like a constellation in the night sky, each person’s social world is made up of three focal “stars.” These are the quality of social relationships, the number of social interactions and how strong a person’s need is for social connection. If you draw a line between each point, you’ll get a “constellation” that paints a decent picture of someone’s social health.

Xia identified five main social profiles, or constellations, based on these factors:

11. **High connection:** These people score high on all three points. They have many people to interact with and the relationships are all high quality and meet the person's social needs. The social overachiever!
22. **Satisfied:** These are the “quality over quantity” people. They have fewer, but high-quality connections. Their social needs are met.
33. **Compensatory:** These individuals have plenty of acquaintances but not many deeply-connected relationships. Quantity compensates for lack of depth.
44. **Dissatisfied:** These individuals crave connection but have too few relationships or ones that aren't high enough quality to meet their needs.
55. **Low connection:** The social hermits. These people don't have many people to hang out with and lack high-quality relationships, but they don't mind because they have little need for social engagement anyway.

Ultimately, Xia's research found that it's not just about how many friends someone has or even how close they are — what matters most is whether a person's social reality matches their internal needs.

With this in mind, we asked Xia about her thoughts on social connections for healthy living.

Note: Responses have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Question: Social connections are important. But just how important? Can we get by without them?

Answer: No, we can't thrive without them. Decades of research, including theories like the "Need to Belong" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" (Maslow, 1943) and the "Self-Determination Theory" (i.e., the relatedness need; Ryan & Deci, 2000) highlight how social connections are a fundamental human need. Many empirical studies also show that lacking social connections increases the risk of mental distress.

When face-to-face interactions are limited, people will still find creative ways to meet this need. Some turn to pets for companionship and others use social media or virtual communities; now we are even using AI-driven companions for conversation and emotional support. While these alternatives can help, they serve more as compensation than a replacement for the deep human need for connection. Humans, as social animals, just cannot get by without real social connections.

Q: How does the digital age and social media complicate our ability to form and maintain meaningful connections?

A: This is a great question because the digital age and social media can have both positive and negative effects on our social connections. On one hand, spending more time on devices can reduce face-to-face interactions, and social media can sometimes increase social anxiety or online bullying. On the other hand, technology also offers incredible opportunities to build and maintain meaningful connections.

For example, video chats allow us to stay close to loved ones who are far away, especially during major life transitions like moving for college or a job. Social media and virtual communities also let us connect with people who share our interests, goals or values, regardless of geographic or language barriers — something that was much harder before the digital age. Ultimately, technology isn't inherently good or bad — it's just a tool. The key is to embrace the changes it brings and use it in constructive ways to strengthen our relationships. While the digital age complicates how we connect, it also opens up new possibilities for meaningful interactions.

Q: How can people identify an unhealthy or toxic relationship — and how can they deal with it?

A: Identifying a toxic relationship can be challenging, especially when you're deeply invested in it. Ask yourself these questions: 1. Does this relationship make your life better and more fulfilling? 2. Do the people who care about you, like friends or family, feel happy for you in this relationship? 3. Instead of "thinking" about what you might be doing right or wrong, focus on how you "feel" in this relationship.

If your answers to these questions are mostly negative, it's likely a toxic relationship rather than one that just needs work. In such cases, cutting ties may be a healthy decision. However, if the relationship is unavoidable (e.g., with a coworker or family member), redefining boundaries and advocating for your own needs can help. Set clear limits and prioritize your well-being.

Q: What are some practical or research-backed ways to improve existing relationships?

A: First, practice empathy by understanding the other person's needs and responding positively. While needs vary, the key is to make them feel liked, accepted, valued and supported. Second, create shared experiences and activities that you both enjoy. Spend quality time together, laugh, share inside jokes or check in on each other regularly. Refreshing shared memories and actively listening to each other also deepen your bond. Third, be dependable and offer unconditional support when your partner needs it. Consistency matters, so show up for them, whether it's during tough times or everyday moments. Follow through on your promises.

Q: The U.S. surgeon general shared concerns about a nationwide loneliness epidemic. Besides the social constellation research, what other current or future research are you conducting that will help address this growing concern?

A: In an NIH-funded project, we are taking a holistic, person-centered approach to study social connections — not just close relationships like family and friends, but also broader social interactions in daily life. By combining micro-level (day-to-day interactions) and macro-level (long-term patterns) perspectives, we aim to inform both just-in-time interventions and long-term strategies to improve well-being. We also differentiate between in-person and virtual interactions to better understand how technology influences social life and well-being.

Another ongoing project focuses on identifying what makes people feel loved. We're currently developing a measurement tool and designing experimental studies to enhance feelings of being loved in interpersonal interactions. The goal is to improve our understanding of both in-person and virtual social interactions to help combat loneliness and promote high-quality social connections.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



According to research on the U.S. surgeon general's website, people who feel socially connected are over two times as likely to report being in good or excellent health. ASU photo