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says Shelley Taylor, a psychologist at the University of California at Los Angeles. "Makir time for close relationships is as vital as many other things people do, perhaps more important," Taylor says.

A primary reason is that socially connected people—those with a romantic partner, frequent contact with friends and family, and involvement with volunteer or religious organizations—are less prone to [stress](#). While normal in short intervals, chronic stress wears down the body over time and is implicated in an increased risk of heart disease, [depression](#) and reduced immune function.

Social support seems to keep stress responses, such as increased heart rate, hypertension and stress hormones, from running amok, says Taylor. And the reason is ancient. "Our need for social contact is so fundamental that what drives us toward peopl has to be somewhat biologically based," Taylor says.

The quality of relationships matters as well. Feelings of loneliness may be as damaging actual physical isolation, says John Cacioppo, a professor of psychology at the Universit of Chicago and an expert on how loneliness affects health. In a study of 135 healthy students at Ohio State University, Cacioppo found that those who perceived themselves as lonely had higher levels of cortisol, a stress hormone that causes the body to store fa in the abdomen, a risk factor for heart disease.

Establishing new relationships can help, but may be problematic for isolated individuals. Cacioppo warns that lonely people could hamper their own best efforts because they see the world as more threatening and less rewarding than socially embedded people do. "Lonely people want to be affiliated with others, but they expect [negative responses] an engage in self-protective behaviors that are self-defeating," Cacioppo says. Experts recommend joining anything from a book club to Toastmasters. "Research has shown th just being a member of a local club or an organization has health-protective effects," say Taylor.

Sidebar: Only the Lonely A survey of 600 physicians found that they believe patients surrounded by family and friends receive better medical treatment than those with no

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Personal relationships are taken for granted, even though research shows that people with strong social ties live longer than those who are isolated,

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obvious support network.

Though lonely and non-lonely people get the same amount of [sleep](#), new research suggests that people who are socially connected get a more restorative night's rest.

The number of Americans living alone is expected to reach almost 31 million by 2010—26 percent from 1995.

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