



# *Social Connections* are Good for your Mental Health

By Maxine Paul and Heather Powell

**“Where are you from, my dear?  
Who’s your father?”**

If you’ve grown up here or lived in our province you’ve most likely been asked – and answered those questions a zillion times. As Newfoundlanders, we seem to need to know who’s connected with whom. And when we figure out that yes, we do indeed know your father or someone who knows him, well then, we’ll gladly give you a lift down the road, mind your cat, or invite you in for a cup of tea.

Human beings are social creatures. We have a great need to connect with others and to feel that we belong. But did you know that in addition to maybe getting a lift down the road, being socially connected to others in your community can be good for your health?

Being socially connected refers to how involved we are with our family, friends and community. Do you have friends that you get together with on Friday nights? Can you call upon a neighbour when help is needed to shovel the driveway – and can they call upon you? Do you have family members who live close by? Are you a member of a local sports team, service group or church? Relationships with others such as these give us pleasure and help us create a sense of belonging. In times of difficulty, we connect with the people we know for support and help.

So what does this have to do with our health? Well, when we think of health, often the first thing that comes to mind is our physical health – things such as our blood pressure, or cholesterol level – all important to our health for sure. But our overall health is made up of much more than just how we feel physically. It includes our emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being too. Our mental health and well-being influences our physical health, how we feel about

ourselves, how we deal with day-to-day challenges, and how we bounce back from difficult times.

Being socially connected is one way we can enhance our mental health. Even if we have other health issues, come from different walks of life, are young or old, good mental health is something we all can have.

In our province, we have long been known for being a friendly bunch – for welcoming those from near and far, for making connections. People in this province report having the best mental health in Canada! Newfoundlanders and Labradorians say they are less stressed and have more people they can rely on than anywhere else in the country.

### So what can you do to improve your mental health or that of those you love?

- Make a new friend or two...reach out to others who may have fewer connections than you do.
- Get involved in a cause you believe in...join a society or a club, or attend church more often.
- Get involved in a physical activity you enjoy.
- Volunteer at your local school, hospital or seniors' home.
- Get involved in your town or community council. Most towns have lots of committees that they need people to help with.
- Set up a youth group in your community so young people have a place where they belong.
- Start a friendly visiting program for older people in your community.
- Spend time every day talking to your children and their friends about their lives...ask questions about emotions and values, along with things like homework and chores.
- Say hello to people you see in your neighbourhood, especially to any young people who hang out nearby. If you stop to have a friendly chat they will know that you are interested and care about them.

*If you are doing some or most of these, good for you; you are helping to make Newfoundland and Labrador a great place to live and taking care of your own mental health at the same time.*

## Socially Connected...

### Children and Teenagers

Research shows that when children and teenagers have close relationships with their family members and feel accepted at school and in the community, they have better behaviour. They are less likely to engage in high-risk activities like crime and drug or alcohol abuse. They also do better in school, get better jobs and are healthier mentally and physically. Community members can help children and teenagers simply by taking notice of them and offering a friendly greeting.

### Older Adults

For older people, having social connections can mean a longer and healthier life. Lots of friends and activities are as important as exercise and eating well to the overall health of seniors. Like young people, older people need places to go and people to see in order to be as healthy as possible. Communities need to create opportunities for seniors to get together such as seniors clubs and intergenerational programs.

