

social relationships, group memberships and health: what we can do

this handout originally appeared as a www.goodmedicine.org.uk blog post on 19.02.16

I recently wrote a blog post "*Social relationships, group memberships and health: background*", where I described some of the mental & physical health benefits of group membership. I mentioned too the recent research study "*Greater number of group identifications is associated with healthier behaviour*" where the authors write: "*What is already known on this subject? Researchers from a number of disciplines – especially social epidemiologists – have investigated the link between social ties and health behaviour in the past. These researchers have shown that, overall, greater ties predict healthier behaviour. However, the vast majority of studies have operationalized 'social ties' as the amount of contact (e.g., frequency of interactions) with close others or members of relevant groups, while generally neglecting the subjective dimension of ties with others and groups (e.g., sense of belonging and affiliation). More recently, some researchers have begun to look at the link between group identification and health behaviour. However, to date, this new research approach has focussed on the linear association between identification with one specific group and health behaviours. What does this study add? * This is the first quantitative study looking at the impact of one's number of high group identifications on four crucial health behaviours (smoking, drinking, exercise, and diet) in a large community sample.*" These emerging new research findings are exciting and the whole issue of health benefits from group membership is blossoming hugely. As Haslam & colleagues pointed out in their 2009 paper "*Social identity, health and well-being: An emerging agenda for applied psychology*" - "*The scale of this growth can be gauged by considering the increase over time in the number of articles whose titles, abstracts, or keywords jointly reference "social/organisational/ethnic identity/identification" and "health and/or well(-)being". The trend line ... reveals a logarithmic increase in the number of publications that include those terms ... (and) ... a quadratic increase in the number of times these publications have themselves been cited.*"

And how can we go ahead to apply these ideas for the benefit of our own health and the health of others? Well Jolanda Jetten's recent edited book "*The social cure*" is rich in suggestions as its description highlights - "*A growing body of research shows that social networks and identities have a profound impact on mental and physical health. With such mounting evidence of the importance of social relationships in protecting health, the challenge we face is explaining why this should be the case. What is it that social groups offer that appears to be just as beneficial as a daily dose of vitamin C or regular exercise? This edited book brings together the latest research on how group memberships, and the social identities associated with them, determine people's health and well-being. The volume provides a variety of perspectives from clinical, social, organisational, and applied fields that offer theoretical and empirical insights into these processes and their consequences. The contributions present a rich and novel analysis of core theoretical issues relating to the ways in which social identities, and factors associated with them (such as social support and a sense of community), can bolster individuals' sense of self and contribute to physical and mental health. In this way it is shown how social identities constitute a 'social cure', capable of promoting adjustment, coping, and well-being for individuals dealing with a range of illnesses, injuries, trauma and stressors. In addition, these theories provide a platform for practical strategies that can maintain and enhance well-being, particularly among vulnerable populations. Contributors to the book are at the forefront of these developments and the book's strength derives from its analysis of factors that shape the health and well-being of a broad range of groups. It presents powerful insights which have important implications for health, clinical, social, and organisational psychology and a range of cognate fields.*" **[Cont.]**

The "*Social identity and groups network*" - an international interdisciplinary network of social identity researchers - is another resource. Their website gives links to emerging research and a string of other initiatives including information about their projects. As one would expect there are fascinating developments in the fields of organizations & leadership, but more relevantly for this blog, there are also a series of clinical psychology projects. The one on depression comments "*new strategies for treating the illness are desperately needed ... Accumulating evidence now supports a simple, inexpensive approach that may fill a large part of the treatment gap. Our research and that of others shows that joining a group, or several groups, can both prevent and cure depression. The type of group does not matter, but the group must matter to the individual. To make a difference to your wellbeing, the club, band, or team that you join must be (or become) an integral part of who you are ... In our research, we show that social identity is the "active ingredient" of social connectedness that is curative for depression. We have also found evidence that social identity is protective against the development of depression and that when a person with depression joins a social group, their risk of relapse is reduced by 24% ... We have also investigated how group therapy works, and found that it works in part by fostering a sense of shared identification with fellow group members, and by developing new group norms for healthier behaviour.*" For more on this latter mechanism see too the post "*Be the change you want to see in the world*". There are further clinical psychology initiatives on health & wellbeing in Older People, and recovery from Substance Abuse. Also of particular interest is the description of a five-session Groups 4 Health (G4H) training - "*an evidence-based psychological intervention designed to improve health by providing people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to increase their social connectedness, and in particular, their group-based social identifications. In addition to this skill-based knowledge, Groups 4 Health facilitates social group memberships by offering an in vivo group experience. This involves participants meeting new people (fellow group members), practicing their new skills immediately, and experiencing first-hand how an assortment of individuals can develop, over time, into a meaningful group that is beneficial to health*".

Great ... here's a fresh look at the health benefits of relationships that leads to practical, specific responses & new connections that we can encourage. As so often is the case, tracking change is likely to be useful. The "*Group identification scale*" is one useful tool that has been developed to do this - and you can download the measure here as a Word doc or as a PDF file. Another, possibly even more helpful, assessment tool is the "*Multiple group membership scale*" - again this is downloadable as a Word doc or as a PDF file. Working more in depth (and now updated to include group memberships) is the triad of handouts "*Personal community map*", "*Personal social networks: assessing how we're doing*" and "*Personal community questions*". This developing understanding of the importance of social group memberships is great. It's practically very useful and relationships are crucial not just for health but also for high levels of wellbeing - see, for example, the classic Diener & Seligman paper "*Very happy people*".

(note, links to all articles mentioned are on the 19.02.16 www.goodmedicine.org.uk blog post)
