Mind-Body Resiliency: Mounting Evidence Social Networks Are Essential to Whole Health

By Larry Fricks, Director, Appalachian Consulting Group

Promoting a social network is one of the 10 health and resiliency domains featured in the Peer Support Whole Health and Resiliency (PSWHR) training, and mounting research shares evidence that it may be among the most important predictors of mind-body whole health.

In the PSWHR training session on the Power of Human Connections, cardiologist Dr. Dean Ornish is quoted from his bestselling book, entitled Love and Intimacy, as saying, “Anything that promotes isolation, separation, loneliness, loss, hostility, anger, cynicism, depression, alienation and related feelings often leads to suffering, disease and premature death from all causes. When you feel loved, nurtured, cared for, supported and intimate, you are much more likely to be happier and healthier. You have a much lower risk of getting sick and, if you do, a much greater chance of surviving.”

Dr. Ornish shares research showing that people with the strongest social ties had dramatically lower rates of disease and premature death than those who felt isolated and alone. Those who lacked regular participation in organized social networks - like peer support groups - had fourfold increased risk of dying six months after open heart surgery.

Studies include the “Roseto Effect,” documenting that a close-knit Italian-American community in Roseto, PA had near immunity to one of the most common causes of death in the U.S. – heart attacks. The men of the village smoked and drank wine freely and ate traditional Italian food modified with unhealthy ingredients - living lifestyles that should have medically predicted short lives. After age 65, they died of heart attacks at a rate of only half the rest of the country. Astonishingly, when first studied in 1966, cardiac mortality in the Roseto community was near zero for men aged 55-64.

Researching and tracing the history of Roseto, physician Stewart Wolf and sociologist John Bruhn found that in the period from 1935 to 1984, mutual support and connection contributed to the whole health of a community, while self-indulgence and being disconnected resulted in the opposite. People are nourished by others, the research shows. Tight social networks are predictors of healthy hearts. Unfortunately for the Roseto community, as the networking connections and social fabric began to unravel through [residents] marrying outside the community, moving away, and some becoming more isolated by material success, health problems began to increase. In 1971, Roseto experienced the first heart attack of a person less than age 45, and gradually, with social change, coronary disease and hypertension reached the same level as in other communities.

Human connectedness resulting from a strong social network is at the core of why peer support is so effective, proving essential to whole health self-management being supported by behavioral health leaders like Magellan Health Services.