



September/October • VOLUME 21 ISSUE 5

COMMUNITY WELLNESS

HEALTH LITERACY WHY IT MATTERS

October is Health Literacy Month. You may have heard the term “health literacy”, but wondered “what does that exactly mean”?

It’s a valid question since we think about the word “literacy” as being the ability to read, write, and understand words or language. But health literacy is much deeper and made of two important parts. The first part is our **personal health literacy** or the degree to which we can find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for ourselves or the ones we care for, such as children or older relatives. The second part is **organizational health literacy** which is the degree to which agencies like the Florida Department of Health in Hillsborough County and others empower individuals to find, understand, and use

health-related information and services. These two elements of health literacy influence one another and can impact the health of entire groups of people.



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PUBLIC HEALTH STARTS WITH PEOPLE: HOW SOCIAL SUPPORT PROTECTS WELL BEING



Shanel Greene, Community Health

Many times, when we think about public health, we think of disease surveillance, managing disease outbreaks, or a coordinated response after a natural disaster. However, public health is the science of protecting and improving the health of communities, as well as the individuals who make up those communities. It encompasses investigating and identifying the source of disease outbreaks as well as working with community members to increase the strength and reliability of their social connections as a form of disease prevention. Research consistently shows that the social support we receive can not only help us better cope with mental and behavioral health conditions, but it can also reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, and dementia.

Social Connections May Help in Ways We Don't Always Expect

In addition to health protective factors, social connections might help in other ways we don't always expect.

Introducing yourself to a neighbor could lead to a future neighborhood effort to exchange resources after a major disaster. It might look like the friend who shares information about a community health screening that leads to early intervention for a health condition, the coworker who offers to help with childcare during an emergency, or the family member who accompanies you on your evening walks, motivating you both to maintain healthy habits.



The people who know us often know when something changes before we might need to see a medical professional or clinician, so a supportive social network can even act as an early warning system, identifying concerns before they potentially escalate into crises.

These meaningful connections can take many forms. Some of us have large networks of people with whom we regularly spend time. Others might have a smaller circle of trusted family or friends. Both are beneficial; it's the quality of our relationships, and how supported we feel in those relationships, that makes all the difference.

Creating and Maintaining a Meaningful Social Network

Creating or maintaining a meaningful social network might look like:

- A regular nod or wave to a neighbor.
- Inviting someone out for tea or coffee.
- Attending a community event.
- Joining a volunteer project.
- Regular check-ins with friends, even if it's just a 10-minute conversation.
- A weekly family dinner.

Whether through family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, or community groups, social connections help to create an environment where people feel included and accepted. And most meaningful relationships all begin the same way, *one person takes the first step*.



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While people from all walks of life can struggle with health information, some individuals may experience more challenges. This includes older adults, people who immigrated or migrated to a new place, individuals with a first-language other than English, those living with chronic health conditions or a disability, and people with lower incomes.



There are several reasons why these groups are more affected, but most important is the possible impact on their safety and well-being. These individuals are more likely to seek emergency room care, experience more hospital stays, experience challenges in following or completing treatment plans, may experience the worsening of a health issue that can become a long-term illness, and can experience premature death that could have been prevented.

For these reasons, the Department of Health in Hillsborough County is committed to improving the health literacy of our employees and their understanding of its impact on community members, as well as integrating ways to improve our organizational health literacy practices. Doing so supports our belief that good health should be an option for everyone.

We encourage you to find out more about health literacy by visiting:
[CDC.gov/health-literacy/php/about/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/health-literacy/php/about/index.html)





Discover your **HEALTHIER** **YOU**



The Florida Department of Health is providing free access to WeightWatchers® to support you on your journey to a **HEALTHIER YOU.**

This program will provide you with a free membership that includes access to:

- Nutritious eating plans, recipes, and meal-planning tools
- Physical activity trackers and on-demand workouts for all activity levels
- 24/7 coaching support and networking with others that share your goals



Free memberships available to Florida residents of Leon, Hillsborough, and Palm Beach counties.

Learn more about eligibility at **FloridaHealth.gov/WW.**

**START YOUR
JOURNEY**



**Florida
HEALTH**

Understanding

Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness

By: Bri Roe, MS, Senior Health Educator, Office of Behavioral Health

Imagine ending each day surrounded by coworkers, neighbors, classmates, or even family, yet you feel overwhelmingly alone. Now imagine spending much of your time by yourself but feeling content, supported, and connected to the people who matter most. These experiences illustrate an important truth: being alone and feeling lonely are not the same. In recent years, social connections have emerged as a growing public health priority (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). Research continues to demonstrate that our relationships not only influence our emotional well-being, but also our physical health, mental health, and overall quality of life. Understanding the role of social connection is the first step toward building better health outcomes for everyone.

Why Connection Matters

As humans, we are naturally wired for connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Relationships provide opportunities for belonging, support, encouragement, and shared experiences that help us navigate both everyday challenges and significant life events. Whether through family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, faith communities, or other meaningful relationships, social connection contributes to our ability to thrive.



Increasingly, researchers and public health professionals recognize social connection as an important contributor to health. Strong and supportive relationships have been associated with improved well-being, while a lack of meaningful connection has been linked to a variety of adverse health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). These findings have prompted healthcare organizations, community organizations, researchers, and governmental agencies around Florida to better understand how connection influences health across the lifespan. Before exploring why this issue has become a public health priority, it is helpful to understand the language used to describe these experiences.

Understanding the Terms

- **Social connection** refers to relationships and interactions that provide people with a sense of belonging, support, and connection to others. These relationships may include family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors, or community groups, and the quality of these connections is often just as important as the number of them.
- **Social isolation** describes having few social relationships or infrequent interactions with others. It is generally considered an objective measure of a person's social circumstances and does not necessarily reflect how someone feels about those circumstances (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2020).
- **Loneliness**, on the other hand, is the subjective feeling that a person's social relationships do not meet their desired level of connection. Someone may be surrounded by people and still experience loneliness, while another person who spends considerable time alone may feel socially fulfilled (NASEM, 2020; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018).
- While loneliness and social isolation are often associated with negative health outcomes, solitude is different. **Solitude** is the intentional choice to spend time alone and can provide opportunities for rest, reflection, creativity, and personal growth. For many people, periods of healthy solitude can be restorative and support overall well-being (Long & Averill, 2003). The important distinction is that solitude is typically chosen, whereas loneliness reflects the distress that can occur when a person's desired level of social connection is not met.



Concept	Simple Meaning
Social Connection	Feeling supported through meaningful relationships.
Social Isolation	Having few social interactions or relationships.
Loneliness	Feeling that your social needs are not being met.
Solitude	Choosing to spend time alone in a way that is personally fulfilling or restorative.

Why This Matters for Health

Meaningful social connections influence many aspects of health and well-being. Research has shown that positive relationships can support emotional resilience, reduce stress, and promote overall psychological well-being. At the same time, persistent loneliness and prolonged social isolation have been associated with an increased risk of mental and physical health challenges, including depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline, and other chronic health conditions (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

Connection also shapes how individuals cope with life's challenges. During periods of illness, grief, major life transitions, or stress, supportive relationships can provide practical assistance, emotional encouragement, and a sense of belonging that promotes resilience and recovery. While no single relationship can eliminate every hardship, meaningful connection can serve as an important protective factor that supports healthier lives and stronger communities.

Why Public Health Is Paying Attention

For many years, loneliness was viewed primarily as an individual concern. Today, researchers and public health professionals increasingly recognize that social connection influences the health of entire communities. Factors such as neighborhood design, opportunities for community engagement, access to transportation, life transitions, and social support can all shape opportunities for meaningful connection.

Because these factors extend beyond individual choices, strengthening social connection has become an important area of focus for public health (Healthy People 2030; Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). By increasing awareness, supporting community partnerships, and creating environments that encourage meaningful relationships, communities can help foster healthier, more connected lives. This article serves as the first step in understanding why social connection matters. In our next issue, we'll explore how historical events and societal changes have influenced social connection over time and why those changes matter for public health today.

References

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HEALTHY FOOD AND COMMUNITY RESOURCE GUIDE

What's Inside:



Senior food
resources



Fresh
produce
programs



Food-Is-
Medicine
initiatives



Community
gardens &
urban farms



Looking for affordable groceries, SNAP resources, food pantries, community gardens, farmers markets or nutrition support in the Tampa Bay area?

Scan the QR code to explore local food access resources and healthy living opportunities.

YOUR ESSENTIAL EMERGENCY KIT CHECKLIST

Being prepared for an emergency helps you stay safe, comfortable, and healthy during and after events like storms, power outages, or other disasters.

Having an emergency supply kit ready makes it much easier to stay safe and healthy.



What should go in your kit?

Your kit will depend on your needs, but these basics are helpful for most households. Add any items that are important for your situation, such as supplies for pets, infants, or people with health conditions.

Suggested items:

- ☐ Water (At least one gallon per person per day)
- ☐ Non-perishable food (such as dried fruit, peanut butter, or energy bars)
- ☐ First aid kit
- ☐ Cash, including small bills
- ☐ Prescription medications
- ☐ Extra batteries or an alternative power source
- ☐ Matches in a waterproof container
- ☐ Toothbrush, toothpaste, and soap
- ☐ Paper plates, cups, utensils, and paper towels
- ☐ A sleeping bag or warm blanket for each person
- ☐ Flashlights
- ☐ A whistle to signal for help
- ☐ Manual can opener
- ☐ Local maps
- ☐ Pet supplies
- ☐ Baby supplies (formula, diapers, etc.)

Stay connected this hurricane season by visiting [Hillsborough County's Stay Safe page!](#)

Mobile Crisis Response Team



We come to you 24/7

We will meet you at your home, school, storefront, or your workplace. Our mobile team of licensed behavioral health therapists and counselors will help you and your family make informed decisions. We offer assessments and crisis intervention for children, youth and adults experiencing a mental health crisis anywhere. Assessments are provided at no cost. We never want finances to be a barrier to getting help.

The Mobile Crisis Response Team also offers educational seminars and consultations supporting families, friends, community agencies and people who assist with behavioral health issues.

Immediate help

When you call, an experienced crisis counselor guides you through triage by phone. Then, our response teams can provide on-site assessment, crisis intervention, counseling, case management, referral, crisis resolution follow-up, and arrangements for inpatient hospitalization.

Our response times vary depending upon the clinical presentation and are prioritized based upon the urgency of the call.

This community service offers detailed evaluations to determine what level of crisis care is appropriate. The team often resolves issues on-site and refers people for follow-up care.

Goals

The Mobile Crisis Response team is available to anyone in Hillsborough County experiencing a behavioral health crisis. We accept calls from:

- People in crisis
- Family or friends
- Community service professionals
- Health care providers
- School personnel
- Neighbors and caring citizens
- Law enforcement
- Assisted living facilities
- Group homes
- Nursing homes
- Residential programs
- Day treatment programs

What to expect

All our services are confidential, non-judgmental, and respectful.

- Initial support and triage by phone
- On-site visit by the team, if appropriate
- Assessment of the situation, resources and existing support
- Collaborative planning focused on solutions and options
- Follow-up with linkage to the needed level of care

Additional Crisis Services

Adult Crisis Center 813-272-2958
Children's Crisis Center 813-272-2882
Outpatient Services 813-384-4000

You are not alone. Don't give up. Call us.

Learn more about our free health education programs by calling 813-307-8009 to register or visit Hillsborough.FloridaHealth.gov.

BP For Me

Blood Pressure Management Education

A five week program helps participants understand blood pressure numbers and how high BP can increase your risk for heart attack, stroke, heart disease, heart failure, kidney disease, and more. With the guidance and education from our registered dietitian, learn how to control your blood pressure through the foods you eat and how you prepare them.

Diabetes Self Management Education

A six week program that gives participants tools to monitor glucose at home, make lifestyle changes, learn about medications and insulin, and make informed choices about foods and carbohydrates to manage diabetes.

The program is accredited by the Association of Diabetes Care and Education Specialists and participants in the program have an average reduction in A1C of 1.15!

Diabetes Prevention Program

A year-long program (26 sessions) designed around behavior modification and resources to cope with stress, choosing healthy meals, and getting into an exercise routine. This program is great for those looking for ongoing accountability, support, and permanent lifestyle changes. This evidence-based weight loss program has a participant average weight loss of 6% of their body weight. Those who lose 5-7% of their body weight, it can reduce the risk for developing type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers, along with lowering cholesterol, and improving blood glucose levels.

Get Into Fitness Today

A 12-week program for health and wellness, using science-based information to reduce chronic diseases through obesity prevention. This program is great for those who already know the basics of wellness and just need a refresher and motivation to lose weight. Our GIFT program has helped 90% of participants increase their physical activity, and is for anyone who is looking for a starting point to lose weight. You'll learn tools for healthy eating and how to be more physically active.

Get Into Fitness Together - a Learning Emotional Activity Program (GIFT-LEAP)

Designed to encourage children ages 5-9 years in making healthy choices so that they can lead a healthy lifestyle into adulthood. The program is six weeks long and covers healthy eating, physical activity, and how to deal with stress and emotions. Families are welcome to join in the program.

BREAST AND CERVICAL CANCER EARLY DETECTION PROGRAM

We offer **free** mammogram and Pap smear testing. For more information and to schedule an appointment, call 813-307-8082.

Tampa Family Health Center
To schedule an appointment, call
813-284-4529

Fl♥rida KidCare

The Florida health insurance for children for those that are eligible, birth through age 18, even if one or both parents are working. To apply by phone, call 888-540-5437, or TTY-877-316-8748.

FL HEALTH CHARTS

Have you ever wondered about the health of your community or state and how it compares to other Floridians? If so, Florida Health Charts is a great resource for accurate health data.

Learn more at **FLHealthCHARTS.gov**

PARKS AND RECREATION

Florida State Park
FloridaStateParks.org

Hillsborough County Parks, Recreation, and Conservation
HillsboroughCounty.org

Plant City Parks and Recreation
PlantCityGov.com/ParksRec

Tampa Parks and Recreation
TampaGov.net/parks-and-recreation

Temple Terrace Parks and Recreation
TempleTerrace.com

CONTACT US

* All numbers are area code, 813, unless otherwise indicated.

MAIN OPERATOR

and director's office 813-307-8000

COMMUNITY HEALTH

Behavioral Health 235-3273
Breast/Cervical Cancer 307-8082
Community Health Director 307-8071
Compass Program 267-6103
Diabetes 307-8009
Epidemiology 307-8010
Health Education 307-8009
Health Literacy 307-8071
Insulin Program 307-8009
Lead Poisoning Prevention 307-8071
Office of Minority Health 307-8066
School Health 307-8071
Tobacco Prevention 559-4760
Weight Management 307-8009

DISEASE CONTROL

HIV/AIDS Specialty Center 307-8064
Immunizations 307-8077
Sexually Transmitted Diseases 307-8058
Anonymous Testing 307-8058
Tuberculosis (TB) 307-8047

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH 307-8059

HUMAN RESOURCES 307-8031

NUTRITION/WIC 307-8074

PHARMACY

(HIV/AIDS care clients only) 307-8072

PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS 307-8042

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER 307-8044

VITAL STATISTICS

(birth and death records) 307-8002

Have a question or comment, email us at
DLCHD29WebsiteDistribution@FLhealth.gov



Mission: To protect, promote, and improve the health of all people in Florida through integrated state, county, and community efforts.

**Florida Department of Health in
Hillsborough County**

Health Education (70)
P.O. Box 5135
Tampa, FL 33675