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Friends and Colds

What do your friends have to do with you catching a cold? The obvious answer is that your friends may be carriers of a rhinovirus, so that you may catch a cold from one of your friends. The less obvious answer is that having good friends may make you less susceptible to catching a cold. How can that be?

Over the past 20 years, healthy volunteers in the Pittsburgh area have allowed psychologist Sheldon Cohen and his colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University to intentionally expose them to viruses that cause the common cold. The exposures occurred after the participants were evaluated on various psychological and social factors. Subsequently, the volunteers were quarantined and carefully monitored for evidence of cold symptoms. Typically, about one-third of the participants developed a cold. The main research question has been whether or not psychosocial factors can reliably predict which participants will get sick.

Of course, if the answer to this research question was "no," the research would not have been funded for 20 years and there would be no reason to write this article. In Cohen's initial study, stress (including stressful life events, perceived stress, and negative emotions) was indeed associated with an increased likelihood of developing a clinical cold. The relationship between stress and susceptibility of developing a cold was independent of a variety of other factors known to increase the likelihood of illness (such as poor sleep, smoking, inadequate exercise, etc.).

When it comes to colds, all stressors are not equal. The likelihood of illness increases with the duration of the stress, especially ongoing interpersonal problems with family/friends or work-related stressors such as underemployment or unemployment.

Having a greater number of social roles is associated with less risk of a cold. That is, people who have more social involvements seem less susceptible to infectious illness. More social roles typically means that additional social support is available, and it is well established that social support buffers the negative impact of stress on health.

Friendships are important to us in many ways. Your health is one noteworthy reason to spend lots of time with good friends... especially when they don't actually have colds!

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