

Study says friends are most valued in cultures where they may be needed most

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Friends are more than just trusted confidantes, say Michigan State University researchers who have examined the cultural and health benefits of close human relationships in a new study.

"Friendships are one of the untapped resources people can draw on to pursue a happier and healthier life. They literally cost nothing and have health and well-being benefits," said William Chopik, an assistant professor of psychology at MSU and the study's senior author.

Published in *Frontiers of Psychology*, the study is the largest of its kind and included 323,200 participants from 99 countries. Prior studies compared only a few specific cultures to one another—but did not take such a comprehensive view.

"We found that placing a value on friendship was good for people's health and well-being regardless of where they lived. However, looking at [friendships](#) as an important part of life is more important in some cultures than it is in others."

Using the World Values Survey, the researchers pulled data from multiple sources including datasets on friendship, health, happiness findings; economic variables; and cultural variables.

Researchers found that around the world those who invest in friendships enjoy better physical and [psychological health](#), particularly older adults or those with less education. The benefits are especially evident in cultures that are more individualistic, unequal or constraining.

"People who come from more privileged settings have a lot of resources that contribute to their health and happiness, but it looks like—for those who don't have those resources—friendships might serve as a particularly important factor in their lives," Chopik said.

One of the goals of MSU's Close Relationships Lab—founded and run by Chopik—is to examine friendships and study them in ways that people can improve their lives for the better.

"In today's world there's a general feeling that we're in a 'friendship crisis' in which people are lonely and want friends but struggle to make them," Chopik said. "We show here that they're beneficial for nearly everyone, everywhere. But why are they so hard to form and keep? That's what we're working on next."

More information: Peiqi Lu et al, Friendship Importance Around the World: Links to Cultural Factors, Health, and Well-Being, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.570839](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.570839)

Provided by Michigan State University

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