

Take charge of your health today. Be informed. Be involved.



ESTHER BUSH

Social support

Happy New Year! This month, the "Take Charge of Your Health Today" page focuses on research being done in our local area about the positive health outcomes of social support and connections. Jennifer R. Jones, MPH, CTSI community engagement senior coordinator, and Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, discussed this topic.

JJ: Good afternoon, Ms. Bush. Happy 2018! Can you believe that this year celebrates seven years of the "Take Charge" page feature and our interviews?

EB: Time goes so fast, Jennifer! We've covered many health and research topics throughout the years. The kick-off to a new year motivates many people to make resolutions or changes in their lifestyle or behavior. Some people may want to quit smoking, organize their closet or spend more quality time with loved ones. Some people may want to eat healthier, spend more time outside, exercise more or watch their budget and save money. The list could be endless!

JJ: That's exactly right, Esther. I have personal goals to do many of the things you just listed. Our January page focuses on social support. To accomplish goals and resolutions, we need other people. Research shows that social support can have positive outcomes. As Dr. Ana Radovic discusses, there are many types of support we can give to and get from others.

EB: I'm really glad Ana outlined the different types of support. I don't think I've ever had it explained in that way. It makes me look at the song "Lean on Me" in a new way! Our December page was on cyberbullying, and I appreciate that the SOVA websites are safe places for adolescents and their parents to share their feelings and to learn more about depression and anxiety. The holidays, while joyous, are difficult times for many people.

JJ: I agree, Esther. The SOVA websites are one of many ways that those suffering can find a supportive community. We also worked this month with another expert on social connections. What is awesome about Dr. Alison Culyba's research is that she is working with local Pittsburgh adolescents to understand what protects youths. Her work will look at the tangible pieces of social support and mentorship to design interventions that positively affect youths as they grow into adults.

EB: You always provide the most fascinating and new research. I'm so proud of this partnership and what we've all created together. I know that each month I learn something new or think about my health in a different way. This year we will continue to disseminate health and research to Courier readers.

JJ: Thank you, Esther, for your time and energy to make these pages empowering to readers. From all of us at the Urban League, CTSI, the University of Pittsburgh, UPMC Center for Engagement and Inclusion and the New Pittsburgh Courier, we thank you for reading this page. We wish you and your loved ones a happy and healthy new year. If anyone has questions or would like to suggest a health topic, please e-mail partners@hs.pitt.edu. Our team is more than willing to come to your organizations, schools and churches to answer questions and engage in meaningful conversations.

Social Support and the SOVA study

by Ana Radovic, MD

"Lean on Me"

by Bill Withers
Sometimes in our lives we all have pain
We all have sorrow
But if we are wise
We know that there's always tomorrow
Chorus: Lean on me, when you're not strong
And I'll be your friend
I'll help you carry on
For it won't be long
'Til I'm gonna need
Somebody to lean on

Please swallow your pride
If I have things you need to borrow
For no one can fill those of your needs
That you won't let show

You just call on me, brother, when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on

I just might have a problem that you'll understand
We all need somebody to lean on

Chorus

You just call on me brother, when you need a hand
We all need somebody to lean on
I just might have a problem that you'll understand
We all need somebody to lean on

If there is a load you have to bear
That you can't carry
I'm right up the road
I'll share your load

Chorus

The words and tune of this song written and recorded by African American singer-songwriter Bill Withers capture the feelings people have when they want a shoulder to lean on. When are we not strong? Sometimes it is when we are surprised by bad news. Sometimes it is when we lose something we relied on—a



GIVING LOVE—Brandi Fisher showing support to a local youth. (Photo by J.L. Martello)

car breaks down or a friend dies. Sometimes it is when we lose ourself to illness, to addiction or to negativity. The rules of gravity are what comes up must come down. And so, we cannot always be up. But when we are down, who helps us back up?

"Social support" is a term that describes the different types of help we can give to and get from others. Scientists break down social support into five different areas:

- 1. Emotional**—Others can give you emotional support when they listen to how you feel and encourage you. *I just might have a problem that you'll understand*
- 2. Informational**—Others can give you informational support

when they give you advice on what to do or feedback on how you acted in a certain situation to help you be better. *If we are wise we know that there's always tomorrow*

3. Tangible—This is what most people think of. Tangible support is the actual material aid someone might give you like money or transportation. It also means someone who would take care of you if you were sick. *Please swallow your pride if I have things you need to borrow*

4. Positive Social Interaction—This is someone who will spend time with you to relax or just spend quality time together. *I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on*

5. Affection—This is someone who makes you feel loved and cared for. They may share this in

a number of ways like giving hugs or calling you by affectionate names. *You just call on me brother, when you need a hand*

Social support is often studied in health care research because of the benefits it can have for people who are down on their luck due to illness. The SOVA (Supporting Our Valued Adolescents) research team at the University of Pittsburgh is interested in how social support can be helpful when people are embarrassed to talk about their illness with others. When they are afraid to share that information with others, it can be tough to get the type of help social support can provide.

For teens with depression or anxiety and their parents, stigma often keeps them from telling others how they feel. SOVA team research found that depressed teens will talk about their depression online, where they can be anonymous. But sometimes online spaces are not safe because of bullying or social media making depressed teens feel worse. The SOVA websites are two research study sites where young people and their parents can go online to be part of a safe online community. They can learn more about depression or anxiety. This community is moderated by the SOVA research team to make sure there is no bullying or negativity. Researchers hope to learn whether being part of such a community helps young people and their parents find the help they need for depression and anxiety.

If you would like more information or want to join SOVA, go to sova.pitt.edu for teens and young adults ages 14-26 or wisesova.pitt.edu for parents of teens or young adults with depression or anxiety.



ANA RADOVIC, MD

Connections Matter...Mentors help teens thrive

by Alison Culyba, MD, PhD, MPH,

Assistant professor of pediatrics, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine

Youths in urban environments often have high levels of exposure to community violence. They face complex social and economic pressures and have few safe spaces to spend time. For the past three decades, homicide has been the leading cause of death among African American adolescents. It has been the second-most common cause of death among all adolescents in the United States.

Dr. Alison Culyba is an adolescent medicine physician at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC. She meets young people every day who have been exposed to violence within their families, peer groups or neighborhoods. Through her work, she is committed to protecting teens from violence. Her research seeks to understand the role of positive connections with adults in the lives of youths navigating challenging situations.

Having an adult who supports youths unconditionally and holds them to high expectations helps teens thrive. Research from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) shows important findings about connections. Having supportive connections to adults is important for young people's healthy development. It promotes physical health, mental health and school engagement. Other positive effects show reductions in substance use and a delay in sexual initiation. For many teens in the Add Health study, these positive adult connections come from parents. Some youths also identify healthy connections with adult mentors



DEDICATED MENTOR—Flo Taylor, left, talks with a group of teens Downtown. (Photos by J.L. Martello)

outside their families.

Dr. Culyba's research also looks at adolescents in low-resource urban environments. When these youths have adults in their lives whom they look up to and whom they can turn to for guidance in handling tough situations, positive things happen. These mentors



ALISON CULYBA, MD, PHD, MPH

can have profound protective effects on young people's health and development. Before moving to Pittsburgh, Dr. Culyba and colleagues worked in Philadelphia. In a study among adolescent males there, the research team found that 86 percent of youths identified a positive adult connection. Sixty-eight percent specifically identified a supportive connection with an adult family member. Those youths with positive adult

connections were significantly more likely to be thriving at school. They were less likely to use substances or be exposed to violence.

"Helping youths identify a supportive adult in their existing network, and identifying opportunities to broaden these networks when youths don't have a current support, may help youths thrive despite adversity," said Dr.



DEAN GARLAND JR., a City Charter High School senior, told his fellow teens to "put the guns down," and "rise above," after his friend, Rayshawn Gibson, was killed last December.