

Simple Human Interactions Can Increase Personal Happiness and Spread Joy to Others

In the News

Take a look at the picture at [this link](#). Notice anything unusual?

In case you missed it, every student is sitting alone at a table. The photo calls to mind a classic movie, Separate Tables, in which lodgers at a seaside resort sit at separate tables for meals at the same time each day, only gradually taking the risk of engaging in small talk or making eye contact that offers hope for some deeper, meaningful relationships.

In a recent behavioral study, researchers compared the frequency and kind of smiles of people with or without smartphones. They learned that "participants with smartphones exhibited significantly fewer smiles of any kind and fewer genuine ... smiles. These findings ... provide clear evidence that being constantly connected to the digital world may undermine important approach behavior."

In an earlier study, researchers reported that making simple eye contact conveys inclusion, while failing to make eye contact communicates exclusion. Purposely withholding eye contact makes people feel invisible and ostracized, or "looked at as though air," from the German expression *wie Luft behandeln*.

Many studies show that connecting with family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors, acquaintances and others in positive relationships can offer many physical and mental health benefits, while social isolation can be devastating, as the following heartbreaking story suggests.

A person identified only as GMA from Austin, Texas, commented on a *New York Times* column entitled "Social Interaction Is Critical for Mental and Physical Health": "Many introverts have written here about not needing human interaction, and enjoying isolation. I'm a major introvert and I used to think that, too. Then I lost my immediate family (wife and child). And moved halfway across the country to be near family.

"Now I work from home and never see anyone. Turns out my family is too busy with their own lives and I only see them on holidays. I can go for days and weeks without talking to another human being. And you know what? It's killing me. I never thought I could feel so lonely. I have tried to make friends but I'm not very good at it, and now I have health issues preventing me from volunteering. Sometimes I amuse myself by wondering how long it will take 'til someone finds my body when I die. I make sure to leave plenty of food and water for my cat, just in case.

"People NEED other people, but if you are older, sickly, introverted, etc., there's no way to fill that need.

"[By the way,] I think it will take weeks for anyone to miss me and find my body."

Many behavioral and health studies have shown that positive human interactions correlate with happiness, good health and longevity, while chronic social isolation correlates with depression, poor health and early mortality.

According to sociologist James Michigan, meaningful relationships can provide us with one or all of the following:

- Emotional support from people who are in your corner to nurture, love and encourage you
- Tangible support from people you can call on for practical help (financial assistance, housework, lawn mowing, snow removal, childcare, respite from caregiving responsibilities, rides to medical appointments or a store, etc.)
- Appraisal support, from people who know you well, who are willing to give you constructive and honest feedback about yourself, to hold you accountable and encourage you to be the best *you* you can be
- Informational support from professionals who share their expertise to help you solve problems
- Companionship support from friends who include and accept you into a social group

Unhealthy social interactions can have negative effects, of course. If you fraternize with people who engage in criminal behavior or unsafe sex, who smoke, or who abuse drugs, alcohol or you, you may suffer for it. The converse is also true -- that associating with positive, happy people can improve your own health and sense of well-being.

Julia Rohrer and her research associates reported on their 2014-2015 study of over 1,500 residents in Germany on the connection between social engagement and life satisfaction in the August 2018 issue of *Psychological Science*. Survey participants who increased the amount of time they spent with other people (seeing friends and family more or volunteering, for example) reported greater happiness over time than did those with a nonsocial strategy (such as exercising more, quitting smoking, finding a better job or losing weight) that did not require more social interaction).

University of British Columbia psychologist Elizabeth Dunn and her colleague Gillian M. Sandstrom conducted another experiment to find out whether short conversations with strangers could lift moods. They learned that people who transformed a simple purchase at a coffee shop into a friendly exchange with the barista felt more positive and connected to the community than people who did not engage.

If you make an effort to connect in healthy ways with others, your behavior can also contribute to their happiness, strengthening the communities to which you belong. Start with people you have to interact with anyway, Dunn says.

Even brief eye contact increases people's "sense of inclusion and belonging," said Purdue University psychologist Kipline Williams, adding that "it takes very little to acknowledge somebody's existence."

Just offering a smile, a nod, a simple greeting or a compliment can heighten feelings of happiness and connectedness.

Of course, people who sit alone some of the time are not necessarily lonely or antisocial; rather they may consciously choose to focus on a task or activity that requires the concentration and quiet that solitude can provide. TWW team member Stan Purdum notes, "I would not welcome having to be alone all the time, but neither would I generally want company while trying to get work done that requires my full attention. At the same time, I want to be open to interaction with others and be interruptible enough to meet human need."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Want to Feel Happier Today? Try Talking to a Stranger. *NPR*
The Benefits of Social Support for Happiness. *The World Counts*
10 Keys to Happier Living: Connect with People. *Action for Happiness*
Loneliness Research. *Campaign to End Loneliness*
Is Social Connection the Best Path to Happiness? *Greater Good Magazine*

The Big Questions

1. How can we use the communications technology available to us today (smartphones, texting, etc.) to nurture relationships and create joy, rather than in ways that isolate and alienate people?
2. Have your needs for human interaction changed over time, and if so, how? What might be possible reasons for changes in the amount of human interaction a person might need at different life stages?
3. How alert are you to people who seem very lonely? What might prevent you from speaking with a person who appears isolated? How can you cultivate an approach to human interaction that allows you the flexibility to be "interruptible" when you see a person in need?
4. Brainstorm ways you and members of your church could reach out to people who (a) are not affiliated with a house of worship; (b) suffer from chronic pain; (c) are over 60 in a youth-obsessed culture; (d) work in isolation as an independent contractor or freelancer; (e) are caregivers of children, people with special needs or aging relatives; or (f) seem isolated for other reasons.
5. How many of your friends do you think you can really rely on? To whom can you turn when you have problems? Have you found your faith community to be a source of life-giving relationships that bring you joy? How can the church become that kind of support system for its own members as well as for people in the community?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 18:1-5

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on -- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." (For context, read 18:1-15.)

This incident occurred when Abraham was 99 and his son Ishmael, by Hagar the slave-woman, was 13. Many years before, God had promised to give Abraham an heir. After waiting so long, Abraham may well have assumed that Ishmael would inherit his property, but God's plan was to give Abraham a son by his elderly wife Sarah.

As this chapter opens, the Lord, in the form of three men, visited Abraham at his tent. Abraham welcomed the opportunity to interact with them, and did what he could to make them comfortable: washing their feet, providing a shady place for them to rest in the heat of the day

and preparing a delicious meal for them. As they ate, Abraham stood near, like a waiter, in case they needed something else.

Then God announced that even at Sarah's advanced age, she would have a son of her own.

Quite literally, Abraham's encounter with God led to laughter. It tickled Sarah's funny bone to imagine herself pregnant at her age, and she laughed. A year later, when she gave birth to her son, they gave him the name Isaac, meaning "he laughs." And Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me. Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age" (Genesis 21:6-7).

One can imagine that every time baby Isaac laughed, everyone within the sound of his voice would break out in uncontrollable spasms of laughter at the absurdity and miraculous nature of his very existence.

As it is written, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

Questions: What other times in biblical history did God appear in unexpected forms or ways, to reveal himself to humans and invite them into a deeper relationship with him? How did people react when he did so?

When, if ever, have you suspected that God or one of God's angels had come calling on you incognito, in an event as ordinary as a meal or in an ordinary houseguest or a child, surprising you with something too wonderful to imagine? How did that affect the way you relate to God?

Luke 19:5-9

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." (For context, read 19:1-10.)

Many times Jesus initiated conversations that changed people's lives for the better. Take Zacchaeus, for example. As Jesus passed through Jericho, Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector, tried to see him, but because he was so short, the crowd blocked his view. So he figured out the route the crowd was likely to take, ran ahead and found a sycamore tree to climb. Perched up in the branches, he guessed he might catch a glimpse of the rabbi.

Little did he know that Jesus would look up at him, call him by name in front of the crowd, engage him in conversation and honor his home with his presence. Note that Jesus didn't wait for Zacchaeus to clean up his act before offering him his hand of friendship. By opening the door to relationship, Jesus showed him God's welcome; in return, Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus gladly.

Previously despised as one who collaborated with the occupying Roman force to collect burdensome taxes, Zacchaeus no longer felt invisible. His encounter with Jesus changed everything. He had been acknowledged as "a son of Abraham" too, and had been befriended by the one the religious authorities derided as "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34).

The relationship Jesus offered Zacchaeus gave him a sense that God accepted him, with all his faults, as Ephesians 1:6 (KJV) says: "To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved." He no longer needed to feel alone. In Christ, Emmanuel (God with us) came near. His relationship with God healed, Zacchaeus could then begin to make amends for the ways he had injured others.

Questions: What do you think it meant to Zacchaeus to hear Jesus say, "He too is a son of Abraham"? When did you first become aware of the grace God offers us in Christ? How did that experience of God's hospitality toward you change you?

John 4:7-10

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." (For context, read 4:3-26.)

As Jesus and his disciples journeyed from Judea to Galilee, they paused at Jacob's well, where Jesus rested at midday while his disciples shopped for lunch in the city. When the Samaritan woman approached, Jesus didn't ignore her or treat her as a nonentity, but acknowledged her by speaking to her.

In our open society, that doesn't seem odd, but in the context of that time and culture, what Jesus did was very unusual. He broke through conventions, barriers and prejudices of race, religion, gender and lifestyle that would have divided other people in a similar situation, and the woman was caught off guard. Suddenly, a conversation about a simple thing like asking for a drink of water became much more significant.

In two sentences, Jesus moved the dialogue from the topic of water for the body to life-giving water for the soul. Very quickly, the conversation shifts from what the woman could do for Jesus to what Jesus wanted to do for her.

At every step, Jesus drew the curious woman in to ask deeper questions about him and his identity. Why didn't Jesus observe tradition? How could he offer living water when it seemed obvious he did not even have the means to draw water from Jacob's well? Who did he think he was, anyhow? Was he greater than their ancestor Jacob (was he *God*???)?

Jesus' statement that "he would have given [her] living water" also assured the woman of God's desire to show her favor, even though it wasn't long before she realized that Jesus knew all about her checkered past (she had had five husbands and had moved on to her next relationship already; vv. 17-18).

Before the conversation was over, Jesus had revealed to her that he was God's Messiah (v. 26). She bore witness to his identity to the people of the city (vv. 28-30), many of whom believed because of her, and many more who willingly listened to Jesus because of her testimony (vv. 39-42).

Questions: What faith-related questions did you ask initially, as you began to be aware of God? What kind of questions do you ask about God now? How has your dialogue with God changed over time (if it has)?

Acts 3:6-8

But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he took [the lame man] by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. (For context, read 3:1-16.)

In the early days of the church, Peter and John went to the temple in Jerusalem at the hour of prayer, where they found a man who had been lame from birth being carried in to a place by the Beautiful Gate, where he was accustomed to begging for alms every day. They could easily have ignored him, since they had no money to give him anyway. Instead, they looked at him and spoke to him. He thought they were about to make a donation, but was astonished to find that he was empowered to stand on his own two feet and walk for the first time in his life.

Second Samuel 5:8 indicates that the blind and the lame were restricted from certain parts of the temple. The lame man's healing meant more to him than the physical mending of his limbs; it meant that after years of limitations, he was free from the restrictions he formerly had to endure.

Consequently, he did more than simply stand up and walk, as Peter had instructed him to do. He jumped for joy, leaping and praising God! The disciples' interaction with the man resulted in great happiness, and the way the man expressed his joy opened the door for Peter to share with onlookers the good news of forgiveness and times of refreshing to come from the presence of the Lord (vv. 12-21).

Questions: When, if ever, have you witnessed God turn a simple human interaction into something deeper and more meaningful -- even life-transforming -- not only for the individuals directly involved, but also for bystanders watching? How might this incident from Acts 3 (or Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well) change the way you think about what God might do through everyday human encounters?