

FELLOWSHIP CAN HELP BOOST MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

BY TONISHA MELVIN

When we think of fellowship, we often consider its religious aspects. When I first heard about fellowship as a child, it meant we were going to gather for a christening or baptism, which typically took place in what was called a fellowship hall. Afterward, we celebrated with food, music, conversations, and companionship. Those gatherings happened often, making me feel belonging and love. As I got older, fellowshipping began to look different. As I juggled the competing demands of career and family life, these types of gatherings got rarer, though I still treasured them.

As the pandemic spread, fellowshipping became almost nonexistent. As we emerged in what's commonly called "the new normal," my family and I vowed to try harder at fellowshipping, not allowing the mundane tasks such as grocery shopping, cleaning, and work to get in the way.

We need fellowship as a way to cultivate belonging, purpose, and happiness. Fellowship can support and encourage us in difficult times. In mental health, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory has often been used to

identify how we humans set life's priorities. Maslow's theory is illustrated by five tiers of a triangle. The top of the triangle is self-actualization, then self-esteem, love and belonging, safety and security. Physiological needs form the base.

Although Maslow's framework has met with some criticism, it gives us insight into human motivation and a look at what we need for survival. Humans often have the physiological needs of shelter, food, safety, and a sense of security, but when it comes to love and belonging, we frequently fall short and lose a sense of who we are and what we want out of life.

The ideal of fellowship can face some big obstacles. Caring for a child or older parent can limit our time for broader community, and moving to a new environment without social skills to engage with new people can be a stumbling block, too.

As a health professional, I often meet clients who have their basic needs met but seek help because they long for a connection with other people. When I probe further, their story often sounds like mine once did; they don't have or make time for fellowship. For others, extending their social ties seems too overwhelming and often disappointing.

Even so, my clients all want the same thing: love, belonging, and a sense of fellowship. We can gain a sense of belonging and connection by reconnecting with old friends, making new ones, volunteering, or joining a club or church. Once we make these connections, we have to nurture them by being vulnerable at a level that works for us, being available, being a good listener, being trusted, and being patient. By putting in the work, we'll gain a sense of belonging that will help us meet our full potential and reduce our risk of anxiety, depression, and many other illnesses.



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