

Strategy: Try getting to know some of your neighbours where you live, or just smile and say “hello.”

We've all heard about the “good old days” when everyone knew all their neighbours and could count on them for help. Many people share the feeling that people are less connected to their neighbours than in the past. While it's possible that the “good old days” were not as ideal as we might remember them, changes in the way we work, travel and communicate have had a substantial impact on the amount of time we do interact with neighbours these days. Some reasons for these changes might be:

- Fewer people are at home during the day due to increased participation of women in the work force.
- Children are less likely to play outside, in and around their neighbourhoods, due to the attractions of computers, video games and television, as well as parental concerns about their safety.
- More people have longer commutes to work.

The Internet and the increasing ease of travel have also fundamentally changed the way people define “community.” E-mail, social networking and cheaper air travel have made it easier to maintain ties with people who live far away. It's not that neighbours don't matter anymore. They do. Neighbours can still be part of the support network that reduces people's social isolation and enhances the mental health of our communities. However, as Barry Wellman, professor of sociology at the University of Toronto says, “People's social networks and communities are less neighbourhood-based than in the past (Wellman, 1998).”

Yet, neighbourhood ties still have value. Neighbours are people who might give us tomatoes from their gardens, cut the grass when we go on holiday, and provide various kinds of help and support. Besides, it's just more pleasant, and safer, to live in a neighbourhood where you know people.

However, now that we really do live in a “global village,” most of us will have to put more of a conscious effort into getting to know our neighbours.

Getting to Know Your Neighbours

The approach you might take to getting to know neighbours will depend on several factors, including how much time you spend in your neighbourhood and how outgoing you are. Here are some ideas for getting started:

- **Offer to help or ask for help**

Traditionally, a good neighbor has been one that provides you with help when you need it. In times gone by, that might have meant barn-raising, babysitting each others' children, or even caring for women who had recently given birth. Now, it might mean getting a boost when your car battery has run down, or knowing that more than one set of eyes is watching out for the children on your street.

Offering to help someone who seems to need it is a way to make a good first impression. And, if you need help, don't be afraid to ask as well. Most people feel good about helping someone and having a specific task to do reduces some of the social pressure of a first meeting.

- **Host a block party or neighbourhood picnic**

Block parties can be a great way to help neighbours meet or reconnect, and they often lead to further neighbourhood gatherings or even annual events.

The idea of organizing such an event may seem daunting, but lots of Canadians hold block parties every year. Your first attempt needn't be a complex affair. Block parties can be as simple as a "bring-your-own food" potluck picnic. Ask a couple of neighbours for help. The City of Vancouver offers information and tips for organizing a block party. Click here for more information: <http://vancouver.ca/engsvcs/filmandevents/events/blockparty/> .

If you are not ready to host a block party, try having a few of your neighbours over for a drink or smaller party.

- **Join a neighbourhood association**

Some neighbourhoods have their own associations, a structured group of residents who organize activities or advocate for the needs and concerns of the neighbourhood. Joining a group like this is a great way to establish connections. For more information about neighbourhood associations, click here: <http://www.myhrm.ca/ToolKit/StartAnAssociation.php> .

- **Connect with neighbours online**

Some research has found that communication by e-mail helps people increase telephone and face-to-face contact with friends within and outside their communities (Pew Research Center). So, if you have their email addresses, try communicating with people in your area by email; or, set up a neighbourhood e-newsletter to update neighbours on community activities.

- **Say hello to people you see**

Smiling and saying "hi" to people is a good first step in improving your sense of connection to neighbours; yet, it's not a habit for many of us. Perhaps we are too busy or shy; we may wonder if someone will think it odd if we say "hi" to them out of the blue, or worry about getting drawn into a conversation we don't really have time for.

While some people may be surprised if you suddenly start saying "hello" to them, chances are they'll appreciate it. If you are socially reserved, start with a simple smile and nod of greeting. That way you are not demanding the person interact with you. You are simply acknowledging their presence in a friendly and courteous way. Eventually you might start to say "hi," or make comments like, "Windy today, isn't it?"

These strategies may or may not lead to longer conversations or friendships, but they do, at least, open the door. Besides, friendliness sets a good example that may prove contagious. Neighbourhoods are more pleasant when people say hello to each other.

The good news is that, in spite of the modern challenges of maintaining neighbourhood connections, 70% of Canadians say they do feel a sense of belonging to their community. The unfortunate flipside is that 30% of Canadians do not feel connected to their communities (Statistics Canada).

If you're one of the 30%, making more of an effort to get to know neighbours and speak with them more often will help you build connections. If you're one of the 70%, saying "hi" more often may help your more isolated neighbours begin to feel that sense of community belonging.

References:

"Networks as Personal Communities," Pp. 130-84, *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, edited by Barry Wellman and S.D. Berkowitz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1988).

The Strength of Internet Ties; Boase, E; Horrigan, JB; Wellman, B; Rainie, L; Pew Research Center, 2006.

Community Belonging and Self-Perceived Health: Early CCHS Findings (January to June 2005), Statistics Canada (2005).

Resources:

Web site: www.myhrm.ca. This is a Halifax-based website, so some of the information is specific to the Halifax area, but it also has lots of general information about how to be a good neighbour, including information about block parties and neighbourhood associations.