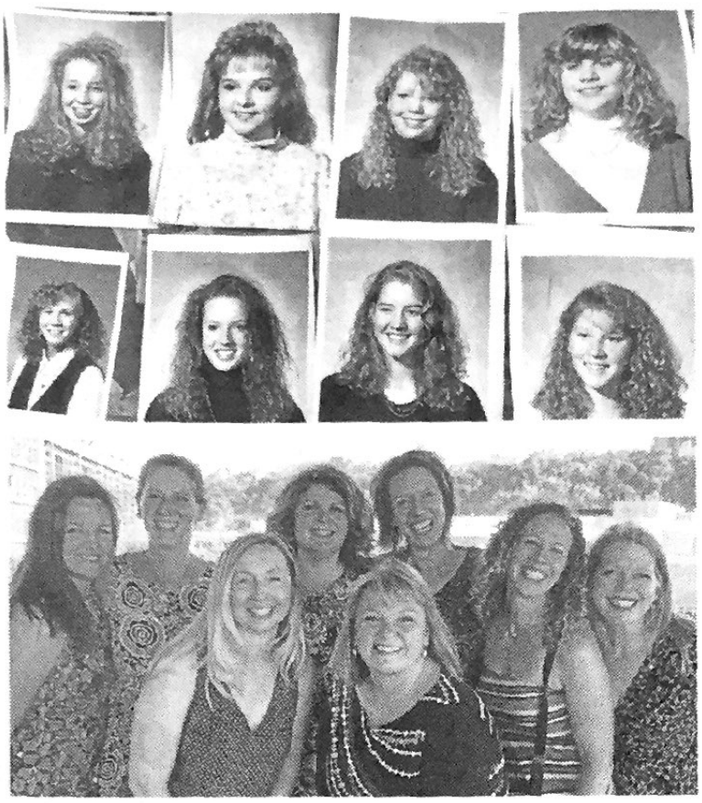
PEAK OF HEALTH

The power of connection, then and now

JULIE LANCASTER

I recently joined a few close friends in Pittsburgh for a 25-year high school reunion. Pittsburgh is where I grew up and lived until I was 18 years old. It was fun to look back on our high school days and the few photos we could find that showed us with permed hair, braces and acid-washed jeans.



Julie Lancaster and her "connections" – then and now.

Even though we only see each other every few years, there is a strong bond between us. A portion of this bond comes from the history we share as we reminisce about old boyfriends, weird teachers, getting grounded – all the things teenage girls talk about and do. Now we talk about life's blessings and challenges – marriages, divorces, no kids, four kids, world travels and buying a house. Our jobs range from a stay-at-home mom to a pharmacist, teachers and a leadership consultant.

Our lives and perspectives are different in many ways. But we still have a connection that surpasses time and distance. With these friends, I feel of "known." This really got me thinking about the benefits and power of connection and what it means to be connected.

Every person has connections – people who influence them and who they influence. Some connections are intimate, some are professional, some are just for fun and some keep us engaged in things other than ourselves. What comes out of those connections is based on mutual benefit and how we grow and maintain those connections. The group size, frequency of interaction and locale may vary but the benefits help ground us, bring joy and reduce stress.

Paul Zak, a pioneer in the field of neuroeconomics, says our need to be connected to others is the hormone oxytocin – the trust hormone; the cuddle hormone; the feel-good hormone. According to Zak, "Civilization is dependent on oxytocin."

Increased levels of oxytocin, which is produced in the brain, produces trust, positive feelings, generosity, nurturing and empathy, which makes us connect with other people and help other people. Likewise, lower levels of oxytocin equate to depression, fatigue, selfishness, lack of trusting others, and feelings of loneliness, rejection and sadness.

Finding ways to increase oxytocin will better our lives and the lives of others.

One of the best ways to increase the production and release of oxytocin is through nurturing relationships and having empathy for others. Empathy is the ability to feel "with" another person, to identify with them and sense what they are experiencing. Empathy and connection not only increase the quality of life but may also increase the quantity of life.

When game designer Jane McGonigal, How to Live Longer TED Talk presenter, found herself bedridden and suicidal following a severe concussion, she had a fascinating idea for how to get better. She dove into the scientific research and created the healing game, SuperBetter, which she says can add 10 years to your life. McGonigal outlines four simple ways to increase physical, emotional and mental health and add 7.5 minutes to your life each day: 1) physical movement; 2) counting and brain teasers; 3) looking at an image that brings a positive feeling; 4) connecting with someone through touch or saying thank you.

Looking for a longer life and a happier life? Here are a few simple ways to increase your oxytocin and the oxytocin of those you know:

Connect. Put a repeating date on the calendar once a month or more often to meet with friends. Go for a walk or have coffee together; make time for dinner together; schedule a few days relaxing at a pool or go fishing. Connecting with a group amps up friendships, camaraderie, support and requires less time than trying to meet up with all your friends and family individually.

Compliment. Offer a heartfelt compliment at least once a day to someone. Write a thank you note to someone who has invested in your life or career. Studies show that people who do not feel valued often have all the negative symptoms of low oxytocin. Today is a good day to create a culture at home or work where people share their deep appreciation for one another.

Kindle. Develop new relationships by asking a colleague you don't know well to lunch. Attend a group function. All deep relationships start somewhere.

Move, breathe, absorb. Step outside and breathe in the air, absorb the sun, stretch and walk around. Even a few minutes can do wonders for your attitude and health.

Engage. Take the time to really engage with someone through conversation or a handshake or even a hug. When we connect and touch another person, both people release oxytocin, the feel-good hormone.

Julie Lancaster, M. Ed., is the founder of Lancaster Consulting, a leadership and management consulting company. Lancaster designs and provides leadership development academies and retreats throughout the U.S., working with those who are pursuing optimal success in their personal and professional lives. For more information about Lancaster Consulting, visit LancasterLeadership.com or call 928-607-2041.