



Singapore Journal of  
Scientific Research

ISSN: 2010-006x

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## Membership in Many Groups Leads to Quick Recovery from Physical Challenges

***Being a part of many different social groups can improve mental health and help a person cope with stressful events. It also leads to better physical health, making you more able to withstand -- and recover faster from -- physical challenges, according to a study in the current Social Psychological and Personality Science.***

Belonging to groups, such as networks of friends, family, clubs and sport teams, improves mental health because groups provide support, help you to feel good about yourself and keep you active. But belonging to many different groups might also help to make you psychologically and physically stronger. People with multiple group memberships cope better when faced with stressful situations such as recovering from stroke and are even more likely to stay cold-free when exposed to the cold virus.

Researchers Janelle Jones and Jolanda Jetten of the University of Queensland were interested in how group memberships might give people the resilience to face novel and aversive challenges? In one study, they asked a dozen soldiers undergoing ice-camp training to wear heart rate monitors while experiencing their first bobsled, luge, or skeleton runs -- an exciting, but very stressful occasion. A trip down an icy course set everyone's heart racing, but the soldiers who said they belonged to many groups returned to their normal heart rate faster than soldiers who did not. People with many memberships recovered from the stress more quickly.

To find out if making people aware of their group memberships would improve their resilience, Jones and Jetten randomly assigned 56 college students to think about one, three, or five groups that they were members of, and

to take care to describe why the group was important to them. Then all participants began a very challenging physical task -- keeping one hand in a bucket of near-freezing water. The more group memberships the participants had thought about, the longer they were able to keep their hand in the icy water. People who were told to think about five groups were able to keep their hand in twice as long as people who were told to think of only one group. Because people were randomly assigned the number of groups to think of, the difference in coping with pain was due to thinking about group memberships, and it is not merely due to mental toughness.

"Group memberships are an important resource," the researchers said. "The identity that we gain from our group memberships helps us to develop a sense of belonging, purpose, and meaning. This gives us the psychological strength to endure and recover physical challenges." Encouraging people to think about their groups -- and to join new ones -- is a promising avenue to promote health and well-being with very few negative side effects.

J. M. Jones, J. Jetten. Recovering From Strain and Enduring Pain: Multiple Group Memberships Promote Resilience in the Face of Physical Challenges. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2010; DOI: 10.1177/1948550610386806