

Wheel of Well-being

Are you getting enough Vitamin T?



By Susan Poizner, Zest Magazine

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The Tribal Vitamin

Vitamin T is the "Tribal Vitamin" according to Nicholas Albery, the founder of the Institute for Social Inventions, who coined the term. Nicholas believes that if we want to improve our wellbeing, increasing Vitamin T is key but you can't get the Tribal Vitamin from eating a balanced diet.

"Humans evolved in small groups of fifty to 250 and we still need the feeling of kinship that a tribe provides," Nicholas says. "So, Vitamin T is a recommended daily requirement of contact with your neighbours and it's as vital as the other vitamins in terms of health." The stress is on having friends and relations who live nearby. What's the logic? The American sitcom "Friends" illustrates this well. The characters don't need to make an appointment or get in a car to meet up. They live in the same building and they're always knocking on each other's door for a chat, a laugh or to share their problems. Their theme song sums it all up: "I'll be there for you."

This in contrast to how most of us really live: We don't have time to see friends and family unless we book a date at least a week in advance. Even if we have the time, "dropping in" is not an option because often our friends and family are scattered around the city, the country or even the world.

Vitamin T and Health

Clearly it would be nice to have friends nearby, but can knowing your neighbours really make you healthier? Gary Gooper, Professor of Psychology at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology thinks it can. "During the wars and the depression there was stress, but at that time there was also a sense of camaraderie and community and that's what we don't have today. We had natural counsellors, grandmas, aunts or the neighbour-two-doors down. The health of the nation is suffering because we all got on our bikes and lost that one support system, we all need... the community."

The grandmas, aunts and the rest were there to help with practical problems. If your child was ill and you had to go out shopping, they would step in. Going away for a few days? There

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would always be someone available to come over and feed your cat.

This kind of support stopped small

Natural counsellors were also available to lend a sympathetic ear. “You can't get through any type of problem on your own,” says Emma Gharvet, spokesperson for The Samaritans. “We're here to help people. But that kind of support also needs to come from people around you. When you don't have a tribal support group, you bottle up emotions and they become harder to solve.”

Bottled-up emotions and excess stress aren't good for your physical well-being. “We know stress does adversely affect the immune system. But increasing “Vitamin T” will alleviate stress and can help make your immune system stronger and more robust,” Professor Gooper says.

When Silke Wagner, a 27-year-old accountant, moved to London from Germany six years ago, she missed having “natural counsellors”. “I started working in January 1995, so I had a lot of peers, but what I did miss was a social structure. I didn't know anyone who was more senior, more experienced in life, who I could turn to for advice.”

She found her tribe at a tiny German church in London's Knightsbridge. “I felt much more comfortable. I felt a part of I group and Knew there were people who I could turn to for help, even if their backgrounds and opinions were totally different than mine. I could also adjust my level of Vitamin T, depending on how felt. I didn't have to go every week. But I always knew the community would be there when I came back.”

Stoking Your T Levels

As Silke discovered, that community spirit can be re-created outside your local area. She joined a church, but others might find their tribal mates in a cycling group, a book club, an amateur dramatics society, or an art class. All you need is a group where you'll interact with people, develop relationships and see familiar faces.

Sue Levy found her tribe in the Saturday Walkers' club. Launched by Nicholas Albury's Institute for Social Inventions, the group meets at a London Railway station which is specified in the Time Out Book of Country Walks and they set off each week on a different ramble, stopping mid-way for a leisurely pub lunch.

“I went for quite a while and got to know other walkers my age,” Sue says. “Then we started meeting up on Saturday evenings or during the week for dinner parties or games nights. We all

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became really good friends and two couples met as a result of the group. I do think being part of the gang made me happier. I felt a sense of belonging.”

Sue says she also became healthier during her first-year walking with the group. “I hardly ever got sick that year... probably because I didn't want to stay at home sniffing instead of being out walking with my friends.”

Vitamin T at Work

We spend so many hours at the office... why not & build our tribal community at work? Emma Gharvet of the Samaritans says that may not be such a good ' idea. “Stress at work is a serious and growing problem and some people invest so much time and energy at work that they don't have a support network or buffer at home.”



So, if things go wrong at the office, you may not have a tribe to turn to. The other problem with getting your Vitamin T from work has to do with confidentiality. “We stress the importance of being open about your feelings,” says Emma Gharvet, “but work isn't always the ideal place to do that. Talking in confidence is important.” At work, however, gossip travels fast.

Rachel Evans experienced that first-hand. The 30 year-old-lawyer felt her colleagues at work were her tribal group, until she had a serious problem with her boss which led to an industrial tribunal. “You really find out who your friends are in those situations” Rachel says. “And it turns out that people I was sure I could rely on weren't there for me at all.”

Local Links

While you can get Vitamin T from clubs and social groups, the best quality stuff comes from your local community. But these days few of us stay in the same home- or even in the same neighbourhood - for more than a few years at a time. Nicholas Albery says you shouldn't let that deter you... getting to Know local people can be easier than you would think.

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“Even a nod to a neighbour or a word to a local shopkeeper can build up Vitamin T so it’s well worth taking the time to do that. I have a friend Ken who moved into a new neighbourhood and he got to know the neighbours in one fell swoop by hiring a disco boat for the night and inviting them.”

Don't fancy a boogie with the pensioners next door? Inviting people over for tea from time to time maybe a less outlandish alternative. Getting involved in local organizations can also help you reach your recommended daily allowance (RDA) of Vitamin T.



Time for T

When you’re working ten hours a day and come home shattered who has time for Vitamin T? We're lucky if we have a few minutes to eat a proper meal containing a few of the other essential vitamins that we need.

Professor Gary Gooper says it's important to make an effort - even if you have to cut down on work to do it.

“I think we should create some reflection time to examine the balance between work and our personal life. You can prioritize and set achievable objectives. For instance: ‘I'll aim to leave work every day at five. A couple of days I'll go for a swim. Another two nights I'll spend talking to my kids. Another night I'll invite a neighbour in for a cup of tea.’”

Is it worth it? The best time to find out is the summer holiday season. Are you feeling fine with your friends and family around you? Have you enjoyed inviting the neighbours in for a BBQ or a drink? Does smiling at the elderly lady next door and admiring her garden make you feel good? If so, you might benefit from increasing your daily dose of the tribal vitamin to make that summer holiday feeling last throughout the year.

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QUICK QUIZ: Have you got enough Vitamin T?

Answer these questions to find out if you're getting your recommended daily allowance (RDA) of Vitamin T. (In each question, the term "local" means within 15 minutes' walk from your home.)

1. How many homes in your area do you feel you could drop in on without advanced notice, for a chat or a meal?
2. How many local people care about your goals in life and actively support you in trying to achieve them?
3. Roughly how many local people (including shopkeepers, neighbours, hairdressers, etc) have you chatted with or greeted in the last week?
4. Last week, how often did you take part in the equivalent of a 'tribal ritual' - like attending a church service, having a meal with local friends or co-workers, playing team sports, or getting together with your neighbours?

Take your answers and multiply them by five

If you score 30 or less:

You're seriously lacking in Vitamin T and need to act to boost your intake. Start small. Smile, say hello, make a phone call or visit someone. Ask a friend for tea.

From 30 to 60:

You're getting a good supply of Vitamin T, but you could up your dosage to maximize the positive effects. Look at what you're doing and add 2 or three more connections to others in your week

100 percent or more:

You've got all the T you need to Keep stress levels down. In fact, you wouldn't be out of place as a guest star on the late, great sitcom, 'Friends'.

