Buddy Up

Friends can enrich your life—and your health.

October 1, 2005 By Diana Scholl

When HIVer Quintin E. Perez Jr. was hospitalized for pancreatitis last year, four friends appeared at his bedside, surprising him. “It was good to know somebody actually cares,” says Perez, 40. “If you don’t have that support, you feel isolated and alone.”

If that sounds a tad obvious, think again. New research reveals that friendships lift more than just spirits—they can mean the difference between life and death. Earlier this year, a decade-long 1,477-person Australian study of people over 70 found that those with extensive networks of friends lived 22% longer.

While the Aussie study didn’t focus on HIVers, chief author Lynne Giles says “the message is that a wide social network is important to health.” And unlike past, related research, this study shows that friendships—as distinct from other support sources—foster longevity. Explains Giles, “We interact with friends because we want to—family can be a source of stress.”

Studies have long suggested that social ties are critical for HIVers. A 1999 study of 82 gay men reported that 66 months after being infected, those with more social support were 40% less likely to develop AIDS than those with a less extensive social network. In 2000, a study of 129positive women showed that those who attended support groups lived on average 28 months longer than those who didn’t. Longtime HIVer and therapist Ken Howard notes that finding positive friends can be key. “To successfully manage HIV,” he says, “you need to see others successfully living with HIV, too.”

For his part, Perez knows at least one reason pals are irreplaceable. “I can’t talk to my mother about everything,” he says.

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