

# Study pinpoints role of social networks in happiness

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A study by Cornell sociologist Matthew Brashears finds that happiness comes from having firmly held beliefs and being around people who affirm those beliefs.

To make sense of a complicated world and our place in it, humans need to construct meaning. We need to know what is expected of us, how to behave and how to function among other people. Otherwise, our sense of self is at risk.

But our protective systems of belief cannot work without the support of others. Regardless of "what religious or belief system you accept, if you have a set of philosophical beliefs that you hold strongly, and you have others who support you in those beliefs, there's less likelihood you'll be unhappy. It's a pretty dramatic effect," said Matthew Brashears, a Cornell assistant professor of sociology and author of a new study published in the journal *Social Networks* that identifies factors that protect us from unhappiness as well as anomia, the individual experience of anomie -- to be at loose ends.

Brashears, a social network analyst, tested Peter Berger's theories about religion and plausibility structures by analyzing General Social Survey data collected by the National Opinion Research Center. He found that belief paired with support from like-minded others has an effect where belief and support separately do not. "It doesn't look like just having friends, in and of itself, has much of a protective impact," he said. "You also need reinforcement. It's difficult to be an outsider."

Brashears explained that our worldview is backed up by a set of beliefs, deriving from formal religious affiliation to secular humanism, that justify what is good or bad and provide a sense of security. These belief systems are tested during catastrophes.

"Every now and then something happens that challenges your perception of the world and rocks you to the core," said Brashears. "The Haiti earthquake is a disaster that strikes out of nowhere for no apparent reason. It can create a sense of being lost and adrift, and it challenges the way that you've been legitimating your life and the way you've been living."

Confronting such a crisis with like-minded people who support your beliefs "helps you get past the challenge without losing hold of your understanding of the world as a whole," Brashears said. "If you don't have that network, it's hard not to lose your grip on your justification for why you should do one thing and not another, or why the world is meaningful. And if you lose that grip, it's easy to find the world to be a very threatening place, because you don't know what you're supposed to do."

Because humans are intelligent, social creatures, and the world is unpredictable and chaotic, we protect ourselves with belief. "We're pattern-making organisms," Brashears said. "We have to create a way of understanding the world in order to act properly in regard to it. We create these understandings of how things work collectively."

But agreed-upon norms are arbitrary and vary by culture. They require justification from religious or philosophical reasoning. And although we need [belief](#) systems to understand the world, Brashears said, "It doesn't mean we are wired to be religious in the sense of a supernatural or metaphysical religion. It does mean we're wired to be religious in the sociological sense. We create meanings with our fellow humans, then we

cling to those meanings. It's very easy to say this study shows that religion is good. Well, sort of. It shows that something like religion that's supported socially can be a good thing for us."

He added that the study is "an important validation of a fundamental claim of sociology: We're group creatures, we create social worlds and we need those social worlds to be reinforced to be comfortable. And when those social worlds collapse, we have a difficult time with it."

Provided by Cornell University

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