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Benefits of social inclusion

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Different experiments show that material support, displays of solidarity, and mutual helping are more likely to occur among those who resemble each other and encounter similar life difficulties ('ingroup members'), than among those who have different life histories and backgrounds ('outgroup members'). Paradoxically, the joint experience of suffering social disadvantage, for instance due to group-based discrimination, can only intensify the realization of sharing similar fates and further cement this bond. This happens also among people who do not particularly like each other and even when they do not know each other personally. This is one explanation why people enjoy more health benefits when they live and work among those who are similar to them, even if these are materially less well off. Further, being respected, included, and valued by others who have similar life histories and concerns is an important source of psychological resilience, that buffers people against the negative effects of stress and hardship. This is the case, even if the objective challenges they face remain the same. The awareness of being socially included and the subjective sense of group belonging enhance people's feelings of esteem and well-being. This in turn provides them with more confidence that they can effectively cope with the hardship they face. Studies systematically comparing people who feel excluded from social groups vs. socially included have demonstrated this to relate to better health outcomes over time.

The link between social support and health

Research shows that groups can also have positive effects on the health of people who belong to them. This is something that is often overlooked. The positive effects are not restricted to those groups that are relatively well off; disadvantaged groups in society can also offer their members support and thereby contribute to their well-being and health.

People prefer to have contact with people who are similar to them and who have a better understanding of what they are going through and their problems, and who give them a sense of belonging. Generally, this kind of contact with like-minded people has a positive effect on well-being. It does not matter whether the similarity involves one's position in society, one's knowledge or experience, or one's preference for certain lifestyle habits.

When people feel that they belong to a group and are appreciated by others in that group, this gives them a certain degree of psychological resilience. As a result, they experience less stress, because they know they can rely on each other for support. It gives them the confidence that they will be able to deal effectively with any problems they might run into, and it gives them the faith that others will be there to help them, which in turn ensures that they are less troubled by the difficulties they encounter (see Box 3.5).

Over the years, various studies conducted among diverse