

Socialization With a Capital "S"  
*The Importance of Building and Sustaining Social Capital*  
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Friendliness. Warmth. Reciprocity. Good Will. Touchy -Feely terms or critical ingredients for human survival and endurance? Social engineers are engaged in a torrid discussion of the impact of **Social Capital** on the public square, the workplace, politics, land development, economics, and families. In the smaller circle of your family and personal life, social **capital** may be more critical to healthy, happy living than you might imagine. As we enter 2007 and consider ways to improve health and wellness, let's talk about "Socialization with a Capital S".

Definition

**Social Capital** as a defining term is attributed to L. Judson Hanifan, a social reformer, who used the term first in 1916, and then again in 1920 during a talk he gave at Penn State University. Here is an excerpt from his talk: "*We not refer to real estate or to personal property or to cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make those tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit, -the rural community, whose logical center is in most cases the school. In community building, as in business organization, there must be an accumulation of capital before the constructive work can be done....*"

Today, most of us consider **Social Capital** to be *social networks and the morals and reciprocity that emerge as a natural outcome of those connections*. Simply put: people need people. That may never be truer than when one becomes a senior adult or makes a significant life transition, such as divorce, relocation or retirement. I think there are five reasons why social capital becomes of capital importance and can be harder to negotiate in a time of transition:

- ✓ After retirement, if one shifts to a home office, takes time off to raise children, or in the context of a job change, the workplace is no longer available as a source of **social**

**capital.** One needs opportunities and sometimes facilitation to develop and nurture networks of friendship and common interest when the workplace changes or is no longer available.

- ✓ Senior Adults, widows or widowers, those who emerge from a divorce, or “empty nesters” have more time to invest in building **social capital**, but may not have the skills or practice they need.
- ✓ The natural aging process, the inherent busyness of our culture, and frequent relocations for work or education produce deficits in **social capital**.
- ✓ The wisdom that come from living four or five decades and dealing with trouble and tragedy often allows adults to re-examine their priorities and may lead them to crave more and better **social capital**.
- ✓ Research clearly compels us that **social capital** is a critical element in keeping the brain healthy and engaged, and in our stress-laden world, the brain is constantly under attack!

Here’s what health writer Tara Parker-Pope reported in the Wall Street Journal in June 2005:

“The MacArthur Foundation study, which evaluated 4,000 older people from Massachusetts, North Carolina and Connecticut, focused on the one-third of the group that had the highest mental and physical function at the outset. Researchers then followed up with them at three and eight years into the study. As it turned out, whether or not the study subjects had a high frequency of emotional support -- meaning they spoke and met often with family and friends -- was a powerful predictor of who in the group ended up improving their physical function over time. Having friends and family in your life increases the likelihood that you will get out more, keep moving and actually improve with age, rather than decline.”

Moreover, the American Psychological Association notes that those who are less socially connected have a lower immune system (Only *the Lonely*, May 2005). Students who reported being “lonely” had worse reactions to flu shots than those who were more socially attuned. Lack of **social capital** can leave us physically and mentally weak. So, how do you build more and better **SC** into your lifestyle in 2007?

### Give Me an **S** for **Socialization**

Let’s examine a dozen “S” words that may help to infuse your life with a healthy dose of **social capital**.

**S**.....Set up the physical environment of your home, office, church, or campus to encourage social interaction. Cozy groupings instead of long work tables. Colored bulbs in lamps. Warm colors of paint. Lots of greenery. Colors, scents, and textures that induce warm, relaxed feelings may help to induce **social capital** as well. Create small lounges or meeting areas on the campus or meeting space, including benches and rocking chairs in unexpected places both indoors and out.

**S**.....Sew the seeds of **social capital** with silly, simple “meet and greet” activities at the opening of sessions, meetings, or gatherings. Don’t leave folks on their own to make friends. As the teenagers say today: “Hook them up”. Try an activity like “Match-Maker” found in the box at the end of the article.

**S**.....Send the right message yourself if you want to increase **social capital**. Use eye contact, proximity, smiles, and gestures that help those who may be feeling reserved or lonely to open up. Use name tags for yourself and participants and make sure that they are easy to read and attractive.

**S**.....Surround activities with music as a method for encouraging **social capital**. Music helps people to relax, reduces the perception of pain, and increases endurance. All

of this is useful in a senior program. Vary selections of classical, New Age nature sounds, ethnic music, and lively pop to keep things jumping.

**S**.....Seek out *Service activities* to build **social capital**. Research suggests that giving back to the community is critical in growing **social capital**, so take advantage of opportunities this year to mentor, mail letters to military service men and women, make blankets for shelters, or mingle and greet at community events.

**S**.....Single out individuals who have done interesting things in their lives and listen to their stories. Listening skills help to grow **social capital** and everyone needs to share. You may have to draw folks out, but giving them a voice can go a long way in increasing connections.

**S**.....Search for ways to involve your family or yourself in the community. Tickets for the local little theater? Band concerts in the park? The idea is not so much that one attends, though that is important for stimulation and recreation, but that one plays an active role in the events. Can you usher? Stamp tickets? Pour punch? **Social Capital** is an investment by individuals in the fabric of community.

**S**.....Savor **Social Capital** with cooking and eating opportunities in which you and yours can play active roles. Sharing food is a central focus of bonding and rituals in our human family. Celebrate ethnic events. Religious days. Pancake supper for Lent?

**S**.....Share **social capital** by making membership in community, fraternal, or religious organizations a priority. Research suggests that membership in fraternal and service groups has been depleted. Choose a group that is meaningful and active and show up at the next meeting. Better still, make an investment of your time and talents and reap the benefits of **SC**.

**S**.....Slide **social capital** into recreation. There is substantial research in the field showing that recreation is a natural extension of social capital. Participate as a group in

the annual October Breast Cancer walks or in other fund or awareness raising walks. Water aerobics, road races, and yoga are other healthful ways to build endurance and social connectivity.

**S.....**School your participation in **social capital** through a partnership with a local school. Reading aloud to a kindergarten class, playing the piano for a school musical, making costumes for a play, monitoring achievement tests, answering the phone in the office, or eating lunch with a lonely child builds **social capital** for adults and youngsters. Many high schools, especially private or parochial ones are adding requirements for social service or service learning. Perhaps you can match up with one to meet both or your needs?

**S.....**Seal **social capital** with rituals and routines that bring people together. Saturday night dinners with candles and wine glasses. ( Wine is optional). Birthday parties with themes and games. Wednesday afternoon Bible Study. Tuesday morning water balloon fights on the lawn. Friday night movies with popcorn and rating cards.

**Social Capital** gives all of us a reason to live and adds substance and meaning to everyday experiences. Being alone and feeling lonely can be as destructive as any disease unless careful steps are taken to weave frequent, fun fellowship in your activity program. It is a real challenge for all of us. Researchers at Duke University reported in the American Sociological Review ( June 2006) that Americans are increasingly lonely and have fewer friends. That which was once natural and accessible must now become planned and deliberate. Even so, the challenges must not deter us when the stakes are so high. Perhaps St. Thomas Aquinas had it right when he said:

*"Friendship is the source of the greatest pleasures, and without friends even the most agreeable pursuits become tedious."*

