



The Front Porch Project

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Throughout the happiness literature, the need for positive relationships is routinely cited as one of the most important factors in living a happy life. Despite this need, Americans report feeling lonelier and more disconnected than ever. While there are likely many factors that contribute to the rise in loneliness, there is some question as to whether advancements in technology have had a negative impact on our relationships.

There are some studies that indicate that the increased use of communication technologies may lead to depression, isolation, and a decrease in empathy. However, there are also studies that indicate that having more methods of communication helps us connect more easily and strengthen relationships regardless of time and space. While the studies to better understand the influence of technology in our relationships and behavior are underway, we really don't know if increased technology is good for us, our relationships, or our happiness.

While the current research area of inquiry is about the use of smartphones and social media, there is one piece of technology that changed how humans interact that is often overlooked: air conditioning. Yes, that is right, air conditioning. Prior to the advent of air conditioning, many people spent their evenings outdoors as a way to avoid the heat of the house. As they spent their evenings outside, they had the opportunity to get to know their neighbors, to talk with others in the community, and provide a space for the children to play together.

After air conditioning was introduced, people spent more time inside and away from their neighbors. Shortly after air conditioning became common in homes, there were other advances in technology that also kept people inside, including cable television, video gaming systems, and the Internet, which now allows people to work, shop, and attend school without ever having to step out the front door. These modern luxuries replaced the evenings on the porch, afternoon pick-up kickball games, and regular contact with others in the neighborhoods.

While they may seem insignificant, these kinds of day to day interactions with people in the community are demonstrated to improve our health and overall well-being and are essential in treating loneliness and depression. Saying hello to the mail carrier or having a conversation with other parents during school drop-off provide an opportunity to feel connected to others and to the larger community.

However, the rise of smart phones is now disrupting our social interactions when we are outside our homes. Rather than chatting with a stranger while waiting for the bus or talking to the barista while the coffee is being made, people are engaged with their screens. These seemingly small and unimportant conversations are a pretty important part of our happiness, but we're losing them to the smart phones, just like we lost neighborhood conversations to air conditioning.

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While no one really wants to give up their smart phone or air conditioning (understandably) I don't think we have to give in to technology completely. Instead, I have a simple suggestion that may very well increase your daily happiness by doing only one small thing: Sit on the front porch.

My idea for this happiness activity happened by accident last spring, when we were having some work done in the back yard. This meant that we could not play back there but still wanted some outside time. So, instead of playing out back, we moved to the front yard. And, when we began hanging out on the front porch, an unusual thing started happening. First, the neighbor kids came to join us in play. Then their parents came to talk and enjoy some beverages while the kids played. Then, the people up the street who walk their dog each day stopped in to say hello and join in the conversation. And, the FedEx guy took a minute from his deliveries to say hello and tell us about adventures on his route.

Day after day, the group got bigger and suddenly, we were having impromptu block parties a few times each week. Through this process, I got to know my neighbors a lot better, my daughter got to make some new friends, and I found people who could feed our fish during vacation. Suddenly, we were more connected than ever to our neighbors and I felt happier knowing that I was part of a community.

I began telling my friends about my experiences and encouraged them to try it too. All over the country, friends and family began doing nothing more than sitting on their front porches. Their experiences led to similar findings. The Front Porch Project was a success as people traded in social media for old-fashioned neighborhood gossip. My friends and family reported that they were able to improve their relationship with their neighbors, had a greater feeling of community, and overall, said that this project made them feel happier. And, not one of them reported missing their air conditioning or cable TV.

If you want an easy happiness activity and would like to join the Front Porch Project, here's what you do: Sit on your front porch. Don't have a porch? A park bench will work. So will a bus stop. Or a seat at a restaurant. The place is not important. Getting out and talking to others is. Pay attention to the neighborhood and say hello to those who pass by. In those times when you may be tempted to grab your phone, like while sitting in an airport terminal, maybe just leave it in your pocket for a few extra minutes. See what's in front of you and let others know you're open for a conversation. Maybe this process will not only make you a little happier, but it may also spread some happiness to others who may need it too.

Questions to consider:

1. What are some easy ways I could build community with those around me?
2. How can I better engage in the community that already exists?
3. What spaces do I have at work or home that could be welcoming or engaging?
4. How can I make myself more open to new relationships (or even current ones?)

For more information about the Front Porch Project, please contact [Dr. Amy Lopez](#) or by calling 303-724-3300.