

Science Supports Social Interest

When searching for the fundamental definition of positive mental health and well-being, few rival Dr. Alfred Adler's theory purporting the importance of Gemeinschaftsgefühl, meaning "social interest, social feeling, community sense, community feeling and humanistic identification." Dr. Adler's theory continues to be validated, as a recent meta-analysis showed the undeniable benefits, both physical and psychological, of regularly serving others.

Adlerian theory maintains that the ultimate expression of social interest lies in the cooperative, productive, and progressive actions within the context of empathetic relationships. Hence, true growth only exists in the context of relationships, and healthy psychological well-being is accomplished when individuals secure a place within the human community. Adler said, "Social interest is the true and inevitable compensation for all the natural weaknesses of individual human beings." Since fear and weakness are intrinsic aspects of the human condition, finding meaning and purpose through furthering the welfare of others transcends self-absorbed preoccupations.

The current culture has been described as self-serving or the "me" culture. Young children inherently tend to care about the well-being of others; however, they quickly learn a "you do you" and "winner takes all" mindset and face fierce competition in the social, academic, and interpersonal arenas. Although our natural state of mind is to want to do for others, many individuals lose sight of this behavior while navigating a competitive world.

Research demonstrates that serving others benefits mental health, the physical body, overall happiness, and even professional success. In fact, the brain's neural pathways change when engaging in social interest. Connecting and serving others effects the production of endorphins, oxytocin, serotonin, and dopamine, creating a "feel good" experience. Moreover, the fight-or-flight response is dulled by attending to others, which can decrease chronic stress and reduce inflammation over time. Professionally, a servant-leader approach earns loyalty and respect, and a professional maintaining a "live to give" mindset has been shown to have increased professional accomplishment and financial gain.

Although characteristics of social interest are noticeable in early childhood, they can also be cultivated and supported over the lifespan. Stimulating the growth of compassionate and conscientious children begins by encouraging them to be sensitive to the needs and perspective of others. Leading by example is the most effective way to demonstrate the significance of social interest, giving considerable meaning to terms "good karma" and "pass it on." Since demonstrating and engaging in social interest yields consistent benefits, individuals can improve aspects of their physical, psychological, interpersonal, and romantic lives by furthering the welfare of others throughout their lifespan.

If you have questions for Dr. Fasula or have requests regarding the topic of next month's column, please email her at drfasula@neurogenesiscenter.com.