

BREAKING BREAD AND BUILDING BONDS

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

As a dietitian, March is always a time to celebrate. Why? Because March is National Nutrition Month! This year's theme is "Food Connects Us" - emphasizing the importance of understanding where our food comes from, learning to prepare food that nourishes us, and connecting with nutrition experts to help us make informed choices to meet our health goals. A key focus, however, is how food connects us to our cultures, our families, and our friends.

More Than Just Calories and Nutrients

When I think of connecting over food, I think of sharing a cheese fondue with my family - a bubbling pot of melted Swiss cheese with chunks of French bread. It's a cherished part of my cultural heritage, and honestly, there's something really special about everyone dipping in the same pot, laughing, talking, and fighting for the garlic pieces! Maybe cheese and French bread are not the first things I would recommend as the "ideal" healthy meal, but food is more than just calories and nutrients. It's recipes that have been passed down through generations and meals shared with friends. It has a way of bringing people together.

Combatting the Loneliness Epidemic

Right now, we need that more than ever. Research shows that loneliness and social isolation are on the rise across all age groups in the U.S., with serious impacts on mental health, physical well-being, and even longevity. Loneliness isn't just a feeling—it's a public health issue. In fact, the impacts of loneliness have been compared to smoking 15 cigarettes per day. Why are we lonely? We work from home, get our food delivered, watch movies at home, and work out at home. Even though we may be "connected" via social media, it's a poor substitute for the real thing. The good news? We can change this! Connection is a choice. Sharing a meal or taking time to reach out can create moments of togetherness that make a real difference. When you think about your most memorable meals, chances are they weren't eaten alone. Food gives us a reason to come together—and that's something we need now more than ever.

Here are some ideas to inspire you to gather and connect with new and old friends, neighbors, and family over food.

Invite People Over

Sometimes we hesitate to put ourselves out there and invite people over for a meal. The house isn't clean. My house is too small. I'm not a good cook. The list goes on. If you've fallen out of the habit it can take a bit of courage to invite new people over. But the connection is worth it. A good invite has 3 essential Ws: what, where, and when. Some ideas to get started:

- "Hey, it's been a while. Any chance you're free to..."
- "I've been thinking about getting a few people together..."
- "If you're OK with a little bit of chaos, do you want to join us for..."

Keep it Simple

People really just want to spend time together - they don't care what you serve! Think about ONE thing that you feel confident in cooking. Make that. Whether it's a pot of soup, a big salad, or pizza, simplicity is key. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Use shortcuts if you need to. People are coming to see YOU, not your house or your elaborate recipes.

"The goal is connection, not perfection."



Get a Standing Date on the Calendar

Scheduling with friends can feel like herding cats. But habits make life easier and adding a regular social event to your calendar can transform your routine. For instance, if you know that every second Sunday of the month you have a dinner scheduled with friends, it becomes automatic. You don't have to debate dates or coordinate every time. Taking turns hosting "Second Sunday Supper" can be a highlight of your month and something to look forward to. Studies show that having something to look forward to can really boost our happiness. Getting together with friends is also a great way to deal with the Sunday night scaries! (that feeling of anxiety before returning to work on Monday)

Other Ideas to Connect

- **Cook together:** Invite friends over for a low-key cooking session. Choose something simple like tacos and divide up the tasks.
- **The Remix Dinner:** The easiest and least stressful way to get together! Invite a guest to bring something they already have in their fridge or pantry. Some grilled chicken, some apples, a chunk of cheese - anything goes! It's the company that counts.
- **Keep it short:** Making quality connections doesn't have to take a ton of time. As you move through your day, where could you spare a few extra minutes? Perhaps a food truck visit during lunch, or a quick coffee to catch up. It's OK to say you only have 30 minutes to get together.
- **Get outside!** It's March and we all have a bit of cabin fever. Being indoors tends to boost feelings of isolation, even if you live with others. Go out for a walk and chat with the neighbors. When you walk every day at the same time there's a good chance you'll run into some of the same people. Or host something outdoors: a backyard barbecue, a potluck picnic at the park, or a simple gathering around a fire pit.

"When we gather around the table, we are creating memories, celebrating life, and nourishing both body and soul" – Unknown.

For more ideas, check out Project Gather from the Office of the US Surgeon General. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/recipes-for-connection.pdf>

How will you build connections with food?

INVITE MAD LIB

Hey! Would you like to (idea for hangout) with me and (anyone else you'd like to invite) on (date & time)? We're meeting at (location) and it would be great to see you! Let me know if you can make it!

adapted from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/recipes-for-connection.pdf>



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