

Fifty thousand years ago a Homo sapiens living in a river settlement with her tribe would have gotten the physical exercise she needed simply through the effort of staying alive. Now vast numbers of people are able to provide food, shelter, and safety for themselves with little or no physical exercise. Never before has so much human life taken place in a seated position, and a great deal of the physical work we do is repetitive and potentially damaging. Our bodies do not take care of themselves in this environment—they need maintenance. If those of us in sedentary or repetitive jobs want to maintain our physical fitness, we have to make a conscious effort to move. We have to set time aside to walk, garden, do yoga, run, or go to the gym. We have to overcome the currents of modern life.

The same is true for *social fitness*.

Answering that question is a bit easier if we understand the biological roots of the problem. As we discussed in Chapter Two, human beings have evolved to be social. The biological processes that encourage social behavior are there to protect us, not to harm us. When we feel isolated, our bodies and brains react in ways that are designed to help us survive that isolation. Fifty thousand years ago, being alone was dangerous. If the Homo sapiens we mentioned earlier was left at her tribe's river settlement by herself, her body and brain would have gone into temporary survival mode. The need to recognize threats would have fallen on her alone, and her stress hormones would have increased and made her more alert. If her family or tribe were away overnight and she had to sleep by herself, her sleep would have been shallower; if a predator was approaching, she would want to know, so she would have been more easily aroused, and she would have experienced more awakenings in the night.

If for some reason she found herself alone for say, a month, rather than a night, these physical processes would continue, morphing into a droning, constant sense of unease, and they would begin to take a toll on her mental and physical health. She would be, as we say, stressed out. She would be lonely.

*If we accept the wisdom—and more recently the scientific evidence—that our relationships really are among our most valuable tools for sustaining health and happiness, then choosing to invest time and energy in them becomes vitally important. And an investment in our social fitness isn't only an investment in our lives as they are now. It is an investment that will affect everything about how we live in the future.*