

NO UGLY®

Eating well and exercise are important, but an old fashioned chat may also be a key to happiness.

While we shouldn't exactly discount exercise, clean air and flu vaccines, new research shows two factors may be as important to a long, healthy life - close relationships and face-to-face conversations.

The view of US psychologist, author and Wall Street Journal social science columnist Susan Pinker, the theory is being adopted close-to-home by Kiwi entrepreneurs Aaron and Jo Taylor in a quirky campaign to help promote their wellness drink No Ugly, launched in 2017.

Aaron Taylor says he came across Pinker's research while exploring ways on what creates a healthy workplace.

"I would describe her ideas this way: You can abstain from smoking, you can stop drinking alcohol, you can go to the gym, you can eat better, but you'll live longer if you've just got great relationships because of the cascading effect around self-esteem," he says.

This, he says, makes it important to think about the world we're living in now: "We've got less time and we're so connected by devices – we've got a computer in our pockets with our phones, everybody expects everything urgently and stress levels are going up and up.

"If you can just take a breather and talk to somebody like we used to, have a conversation and get to know them, we're going to be happier and healthier."

In her research Pinker suggests the key to living a long life is to nurture close personal relationships and face-to-face interactions.

"Here's an intriguing fact," she says. "In the developed world, everywhere women (who more easily develop social connections) live an average six to eight years longer than men do."

She says clean air, exercise and flu vaccines are the weakest predictors of how long people will live; the strongest, she believes, being close relationships and social integration: "How many people do you talk to? Not just the people you're really close to, who mean a lot to you, but do you talk to the guy who makes your coffee every day?

"Face-to-face contact releases a whole cascade of neurotransmitters and like a vaccine they protect you now and well into the future," she says.

Her views are echoed by Margaret Heffernan, an entrepreneur, CEO, writer and speaker who lectures at the University of Bath School of Management in England.

Workplace organisations are often run according to "the super-chicken model," where the value is placed on star employees who outperform others, Heffernan says.

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This isn't what drives the most high-achieving teams, she says. Social cohesion - built every coffee break, every time one team member asks another for help - leads to great results over time.

Armed with these theories the Taylors hope to get people talking face-to-face rather than screen-to-screen.

"A few years ago we became more aware of the importance of good nutrition and overall wellness," Taylor says. "We noticed people were saying 'no' to things they perceived as being bad: ingredients, products, behaviours, and beliefs.

"So we started to explore the concept of a wellness brand that was a clarion call for people who rejected 'ugly'. It was easy to identify – people love drinks and wellness beverages were booming globally."

The drinks were popular, and the couple wanted to extend their brand's influence into the social sphere.

"We have a lot of relationships with professionals in the health and wellness sector who run corporate wellness programmes. We talked to them and asked, 'how do we get people sitting in the workplace, taking a break with our drinks, to collaborate more, talk more, get away from the computer screen, the phone, and actually have a proper conversation?'"

That led them to Pinker's research and it was then Jo came up with the answer: provide conversation starters.

They trialled the concept that would become Caps Chat by printing conversation starters on packs of cards and handing them out, with their drinks, at events like marketing conferences. Each statement ended with the question, 'Is it Ugly? Or is it Gorgeous?'

Feedback from a dozen events, with groups of between 50 to 400 people, gave them the confidence to progress the idea.

"We've taken the plunge and put the conversation starters under the cap of every bottle. There's 50 of them - some are really irreverent, some are quite topical, some are outrageous like, Keys in the Bowl? Is that Ugly? Or Gorgeous? Some are pretty straightforward like, Keto – Ugly? Or Gorgeous?"

For Taylor, while it's a bit of fun, there's a deeper message. "What the campaign says is, a better social life can make you live longer and you can have a social life that can be healthy. It doesn't have to mean boozing."

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