

The Next Chapter



“The older I get, the more isolated and lonely I feel. Could this affect my health?”

The natural inclination of most people is to stay in their own homes for as long as they can. Traditionally, declining health has been the primary reason older adults move from their “family home” into a home that offers support with medical care and daily chores.

Today, an increasing number of healthy, active adults are moving to retirement communities— but for a very different type of support: social support. And they are discovering it has profound and far-reaching benefits.

Studying and measuring the many benefits of social interaction.

As it turns out, having regular and meaningful interaction with others is much more than just a pleasant pastime. It is critical to our well-being. In fact, research is showing that social engagement can lead to better health and longevity, while social isolation and loneliness can lead to poorer health and a shorter life.

Here are a few of the specific benefits of regularly connecting with others:

- **Supports better overall health.** The National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project showed that people who feel the most socially connected are *five times more likely* to report very good or excellent health than those who felt the most socially disconnected and lonely. (1)
- **Offers immediate emotional benefits.** There are obvious emotional benefits to feeling less isolated and lonely. It invariably raises our spirits to have someone share a meal or a movie with us. We often feel better when we have an outing planned with friends or family. These emotional benefits eventually translate into longer-term physical benefits.
- **Improves memory and cognitive function.** Evidence now tells us that an active social life can actually improve brain power, increasing our ability to concentrate and slowing the rate of memory loss (2) and other cognitive loss. (3)
- **Reduces heart disease, especially in women.** Other studies suggest that symptoms of depression and lack of social support (isolation) are associated with more heart attacks, open-heart surgeries, and deaths from cardiovascular disease in women. (4)

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- **Enhances the effectiveness of other beneficial activities.** Other studies have shown that a strong social network of caring friends, family, and organizations can be as much of a factor in successful aging as diet and exercise. Furthermore, adding a social component to diet and exercise can significantly enhance their effectiveness. For instance, those who have a walking partner or join a walking group tend to take longer walks and walk more often. (5)

As more studies are conducted, we are likely to discover many more benefits of social interaction.

Studies reveal significant benefits for those living in retirement communities.

Another important study found that people who choose to live in retirement communities, where social connection is commonplace, are “generally more satisfied with their daily lives and are more likely to be happier than their contemporaries who remain in their own homes.” (6)

It is not surprising, then, that living in a retirement community also has a positive impact on health. The same study found that residents were more likely to report that their current health status was better than it had been in the previous two years, as compared with people who remained in their own homes.

By providing the resources, structure, and support for social engagement, retirement communities offer definite health benefits to residents.

How retirement communities promote greater health & happiness.

Here are a few examples of how communities help facilitate easy, meaningful, and regular social connections in one-on-one and small-group settings:

- **Physical activities** in a spa or health club, walking groups, and exercise classes;
- **Intergenerational activities** with grandchildren and children from local schools;
- **Growing Together programs** for people who share a love of gardening and pets;
- **Volunteerism.** One study showed that seniors who regularly help others reduce their risk of dying by over 50 percent compared to those who never offer support to others;
- **Lifelong Learning classes** for the mind, body, and spirit;
- **Special events**, such as art shows, speakers, trips, and more;
- **Scheduled transportation** connects people with the greater community for shopping excursions, trips to the symphony, and a special dinner out;
- **Dining rooms** offer formal to casual dining options for residents and guests;
- **Common areas** provide inviting chairs and sofas for conversations;
- **Recreation rooms** can include a cards, Nintendo Wii, pool table, board games;
- **Spacious homes** with room to host a book club or bridge party;
- **Community chapel** to worship together and share friendship.

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The benefits of social interaction are heightened if they incorporate meaning and purpose for the participants. Look for a community that has your interests and well-being in mind and responds to residents' desires.

The power of positive thinking.

Older adults tend to love and hang onto tradition—except the tradition of aging. The traditional concept has been that after we reach about 65, we slow down and retire from life. But that doesn't seem to describe this age group anymore.

People are beginning to view their retirements not as “the sunset years,” but as “the next chapter” in their lives. We have people to see, places to go, things to do. We want to exercise more, eat better, keep our minds alert, and stay actively involved with others. We want to do anything we can to extend our independence and live life to the fullest.

Now we know that by tapping into the vast resources of a quality retirement community, we have the power to do all of that—and more.

Caution: You needn't be single to experience loneliness and isolation.

While people who live alone may feel a greater sense of isolation, it is a myth that couples cannot also experience the same feelings.

Perhaps one or both individuals aren't as mobile and feel housebound. Perhaps your home itself requires too much maintenance and ties you down. Perhaps you don't know your neighbors anymore. Perhaps your best friends have moved away or passed on, or your family doesn't visit as much as you'd like. Even though you may be already living with your best friend, there are many reasons why you may both want to expand your activities and circle of friends.

The importance of balancing social interaction and alone-time.

No one is recommending that all of your waking moments should be spent engaged in social activities. There is also great benefit derived from spending quality time alone.

Most of us cherish our privacy and actually enjoy spending quiet time by ourselves. It allows us to relax and renew ourselves. Or perhaps we have a solitary hobby, like reading or writing, which offers us a whole different experience than spending time with people. Spending time alone is a healthy activity, too. It only becomes unhealthy only when we no longer enjoy it; when we feel that we are spending too much time alone, and that we'd rather be with people.

This is for each of us to decide on our own. And this is why it's important to find a retirement community that celebrates social activities *and* respects privacy and individual pursuits.



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Choose your own level of health!

A 10-year study on the principles of successful aging determined that only 30 percent of physical aging can be attributed to genes. Contrary to previous thinking, this study found evidence that lifestyle decisions, not heredity, were the dominant factor in aging. (7)

In other words, the choices you make today have the greatest impact on your future health and longevity.

Sources:

(1) *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 50(1):31-48 (March 2009), Benjamin Cornwell, PhD, and Erin York Cornwell, PhD. The National Opinion Research Center, with principal investigators at the University of Chicago, collected data from more than 3,000 people, ages 57-85, during 2005 and 2006 for The National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (www.norc.org/nshap). Participants were asked about their social networks and community involvement and were measured against a scale assessing social disconnectedness (small social network, infrequent participation in social activities) and a scale of perceived isolation (loneliness, lack of social support).

(2) "Effects of Social Integration on Preserving Memory Function in a Nationally Representative U.S. Elderly Population," Karen A. Ertel, M. Maria Glymour, Lisa F. Berkman, *American Journal of Public Health*, July 2008, Vol. 98, No. 7. A study by the Harvard School of Public Health found evidence that those who are the most socially engaged show the lowest rate of memory decline.

(3) *International Council on Active Aging Research Review*, 7(41) 2007 and 8(12) 2008). The social dimension of wellness has been shown to support cognitive function.

(4) *Psychosomatic Medicine* 55:426-433 (1993), L.H. Powell and colleagues. Psychosocial predictors of mortality in 83 women with premature acute myocardial infarction.

(5) *International Council on Active Aging Research Review*, 8(2) 2008). The social dimension of wellness has been shown to encourage physical activity.

(6) "The Study of Independent Living Residents and the Communities in Which They Reside," The American Seniors Housing Association, Margaret A. Wylde, PhD, ProMatura Group. A study conducted between 2002 and 2003 found that seniors who live in continuing care retirement communities are generally more satisfied and happier with their daily lives than their contemporaries who remain in their own homes, and they reported improved health.

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(7) “The MacArthur Foundation Study of Successful Aging,” conducted by John Rowe, MD, and Robert Kahn, PhD, sponsored by Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; published 1998.

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