



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



Keys to Embracing Aging

Social Activity

Maintaining social activities and relationships throughout the lifespan is important to health and well-being. Engaged people are often healthier, happier, less depressed, and demonstrate enhanced brain vitality.

Benefits of Being Social

Social activity is good for a person regardless of who you are, how old you are, where you live, or what you do. Being socially engaged with friends, family, and various activities throughout the lifespan has many positive benefits:

- Improved social skills
- Improved academic performance
- Positive attitude
- Enhanced self-esteem
- Connection to peers, groups, and the community
- Reduced risk of illnesses and diseases including cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis, certain cancers, Alzheimer's disease, and other dementias
- Reduced risk for mental health disorders, such as depression
- Better brain health
- Overall happier and healthier lifestyle
- May help to increase the quality and length of life

Engage in Meaningful Activity

Sign up for a class in your community and try something new such as dancing, cooking, or yoga. Or volunteer your time at a local shelter or food pantry.

Get Connected

Finding or creating connections is a key to social activity. Social connectedness includes relationships with family, friends, co-workers, and other people with whom you interact as you carry out daily activities such as your bankers, store clerks and health-care providers. These may be people you consistently see or look forward to seeing, people with whom you have something in common, or people you trust. Social connectedness also includes various activities in the community or at home. The types of activities that engage you socially are endless, but it is important to seek or create meaningful activities. By engaging with people and participating in activities you enjoy, social activity can be easy, fun, and fulfilling. Examples of social activities include:

- Joining a community center, club, or committee
- Organizing or attending get-togethers with friends, family, or neighbors
- Going to a theater, movie, sporting event, or festival

- Traveling
- Eating out
- Volunteering
- Taking classes

Stay Connected through Technology

Being social doesn't always mean you have to leave the house. Today it is easier than ever to stay connected through technology. Phone calls, emails, the Internet, typing letters, and even text or video messaging are all common avenues of immediate and easy-to-use communication. Today, even online medical services — including tele-med, tele-nursing, and tele-therapy — allow healthcare professionals to check in on you at home. They may remind you of healthcare needs or provide you with homecare instructions. Today's technology helps people daily by providing instant information, services, and even fun. The Internet is available to multi-generations and provides endless information and opportunities that can stimulate the brain and create experiences for social activity.

Quality Social Interaction

Quality relationships that develop with close family, friends, and significant others help provide ongoing joy, excitement, support, love, and purpose. Meaningful relationships require hard work, dedication, and a conscious effort. They are often characterized by strong lines of communication, honesty, respect, patience, thoughtfulness, compromise, empathy, laughter, and respectful confrontation. Maintaining a meaningful relationship contributes to the strength of the relationship and plays an important role in the benefits of social activity. While acquaintances and friendships of all kinds are important, meaningful relationships can provide an increased sense of satisfaction and well-being.

It is important for everyone at every age to reflect on the things that matter most and to decide if time and energy is being balanced properly. Recognize that meaningful social activity will be different for everyone and may change throughout the lifespan. Young children and teenagers, for example, often value time with friends. With age and life transitions, including losses, social relationships can be a tremendous source of support.

Seek Social Activity

There is no recipe or special formula that spells out meaningful social activity. You have to seek and create opportunities and relationships that are fulfilling and meaningful to you, given your personality and place in the world.

The Social Challenge (Being Social When you Don't Want to Be)

It is important to know your personality and social preferences. For some, engaging in social activity is energizing, while others prefer their own inner thoughts and conversations. Some people, though, may struggle with social activity because they are depressed. In a case of depression, a person may feel like being alone, but social isolation can actually feed the depression. Even though it can be challenging, the benefits of seeking social activity, including one-on-one interaction with a close friend or even a therapist, are worth the effort and can help ease depressive symptoms. Here are some tips for staying connected to the world:

- Create a schedule. You are more likely to participate in things when events are scheduled in advance. Calendars and planning ahead eliminate the ease of saying "no" to a last-minute invitation, force you to create a manageable schedule, and take away the anxiety of thinking about what you are going to do.
- Participate in a support group. Support groups introduce you to others who may be facing similar challenges.

- Write down your social goals. Start small and be realistic. Perhaps a goal is to go to the store and say “hi” to the greeter or to call a relative or friend regularly.

- Take a class. Local community centers, schools/colleges, Extension offices, senior centers, and public health offices often offer a wide variety of classes on various topics and hobbies.

- Volunteer. You may only be one person in the world, but you may mean the world to one person.

Conclusion

While being socially active is critical to health and well-being, everyone has limits on how much time can be spent socially engaged. It is acceptable and healthy to enjoy alone time too because these opportunities help you to reflect on life’s meaning. Engaging in meaningful social activity and establishing healthy lifestyle behaviors throughout your life will influence optimal aging.

References

Adams, K. B., Leibbrandt, S., Moon, H. (2011). A critical review of the literature on social and leisure activity and wellbeing in later life. *Aging & Society*, 31(4). 683-712.

Alzheimer’s Association (2011). Remain socially active. Retrieved from www.alz.org/we_can_help_remain_socially_active.asp

Barry, C. and Madsen, S. (2009). Friends and friendships in emerging adulthood. http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/friends__friendships_in_emerging_adulthood_-_barry.pdf

Glass, T. A., Medes de Leon, C., Marottoli, R. A., & Berkman, L. F. (1999). Population based study of social and productive activities as predictors of survival among elderly Americans. *British Medical Journal*, 319(7208). 478-483.

House, J. S. (2001). Social isolation kills, but how and why? *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 63 (2), 273–274.

Hutnik, N., Smith, P., & Koch, T. (2012). What does it feel like to be 100? Socio-emotional aspects of well-being in the stories of 16 centenarians living in the United Kingdom. *Aging & Mental Health*, 16(7), 811-818.

National Institute on Aging (2009). Participating in activities you enjoy – more than just fun and games. Retrieved from www.nia.nih.gov/NR/rdonlyres/63735317-0100-48DE-AABD-BA4F5344F633/13249/NIATipSheet_PARTICIPATING_09SEPT4FINAL.pdf

O’Brien, S. (2011). To increase longevity, friends are more important than family. Retrieved from <http://seniorliving.about.com/od/lifetransitionsaging/a/longevity.htm>

Park, N.S. (2009). The relationship of social engagement to psychological well-being of older adults in assisted living facilities. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 28(4), 461-481.

Yale Medical Group. (2013). Older adults and the importance of social interaction. Retrieved August 6, 2013 from <http://www.yalemedicalgroup.org/stw/Page.asp?PageID=STW037188>

Vera, T. (2013). Ageing, leisure and social connectedness: How could leisure help reduce social isolation of older people? *Social Indicators Research*, 113(1). 355-372.

Adapted and used with permission of the University of Arkansas Research and Extension, and the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture.

Authors

Erin Yelland, Ph.D., CFLE, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Adult Development and Aging, K-State Research and Extension

Amy F. Hosier, Associate Professor, University of Kentucky

LaVona S. Traywick, Associate Professor, University of Arkansas

Reviewers

Dr. Rosalie Otters, University of Arkansas

Dr. Lisa Washburn, University of Arkansas



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of
Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences

United States Department of Agriculture

Local Extension Councils Cooperating

University of Illinois Extension provides equal
opportunities in programs and employment.