

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 a primary reason older adults move from their “family home” into a home that offers support with daily chores and/or medical care.

Today, an increasing number of healthy, active adults are moving to retirement communities—and 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, a quickly growing body of research is showing that social engagement—feeling connected to others—can lead to better health and longevity, while social isolation and loneliness has alarmingly negative effects on physical and cognitive health.

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

- **Improves memory and cognitive function.** According to one recent study, “Loneliness and social isolation are associated with poorer cognitive function among older adults.”⁽¹⁾ Conversely, evidence has shown that an active social life can actually improve brainpower, increasing our ability to concentrate and slowing the rate of memory loss⁽²⁾ and other cognitive loss.⁽³⁾
- **Reduces the risk of premature mortality.** People who constantly feel lonely have a 14% higher risk of premature death than those who don’t, according to a study of more than 2,100 adults 55 years and older. In fact, having high-quality relationships with a few people is one of the keys to greater happiness.⁽⁴⁾ Another study similarly concluded that among participants older than 60 years, loneliness was a predictor of functional decline and death.⁽⁵⁾
- **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.⁽⁶⁾
- **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

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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.⁽⁷⁾

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

Couples, as well as singles, can feel lonely and isolated.

Even if you're not living alone, you can experience loneliness. The following are common causes for feeling lonely:

- You don't know your neighbors anymore;
- Your longtime friends have moved away or passed on;
- Your family doesn't visit as much as you'd like;
- You aren't as mobile, reducing the opportunity for outside activities;
- Your home itself requires too much maintenance and ties you down.

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."⁽⁸⁾

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 and 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 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% 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, or a special dinner out
- **Dining rooms** offer formal and casual dining options for residents and guests
- **Common areas** provide inviting chairs and sofas for conversations
- **Recreation rooms** can include cards, Wii™, billiards, board games
- **Spacious homes** with room to host a book club or bridge party
- **Community rooms** to worship together and share friendship

The benefits of social interaction are heightened if they incorporate meaning and purpose for

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participants. When looking at communities, pay attention to those that have residents' well-being in mind and respond to their desires.

The importance of balancing social interaction and time alone.

It is an important distinction to note that it is the *feeling of loneliness*, rather than simply *being alone*, that is associated with an increased risk of clinical dementia.⁽⁹⁾ People can, in fact, spend time alone and not feel lonely. We know that for most people, a certain amount of time by oneself can be a healthy activity. There are also many individual pursuits, such as writing, painting, woodworking, etc. (although even these can be done among others). Being alone only becomes unhealthy when we feel we are spending too much time alone when we'd rather be with people.

Each person has a preferred balance of being with others and spending time alone. And this is why it's important to find a retirement community that celebrates social activities and respects privacy and individual pursuits.

(1) "Social Isolation and Loneliness: Relationships With Cognitive Function During 4 Years of Follow-up in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing," Aparna Shankar, PhD, Mark Hamer, PhD, Anne McMunn, PhD, and Andrew Steptoe, DSc, *Psychosomatic Medicine*, February-March 2013 Vol. 75, No. 2, 161-170. This study concluded that loneliness and isolation are associated with poorer cognitive function among older adults.

(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*, Issue 7(41), 2007 and Issue 8(12), 2008. The social dimension of wellness has been shown to support cognitive function.

(4) "Loneliness is a major health risk for older adults." People who constantly feel lonely have a 14% higher risk of premature death than those who don't, according to a new study of more than 2,100 adults 55 years and older in the Health and Retirement Study. Psychologist John Cacioppo was the study's lead author and director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago. *Health & Retirement Study*, 2002-2008, American Association for the Advancement of Science.

(5) "Loneliness in Older Persons, A Predictor of Functional Decline and Death," Carla M. Perissinotto, MD, MHS; Irena Stijacic Cenzer, MA; Kenneth E. Covinsky, MD, MPH; *Arch Intern Med*. 2012; 172(14):1078-1084. doi:10.1001/archinternmed.2012.1993. Original Investigation | July 23, 2012.

(6) *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

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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).

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

(8) “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.

(9) “Feelings of loneliness, but not social isolation, predict dementia onset: results from the Amsterdam Study of the Elderly (AMSTEL),” Tjalling Jan Holwerda^{1,2}, Dorly J H Deeg³, Aartjan T F Beekman⁴, Theo G van Tilburg⁵, Max L Stek⁴, Cees Jonker⁶, Robert A Schoevers, *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2014; 85:135-142 doi:10.1136/jnnp-2012-302755; published online first, 10 December 2012. The study concluded that feeling lonely rather than being alone is associated with an increased risk of clinical dementia in later life.