



## KEYS TO EMBRACING AGING Social Activity

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**M**aintaining 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 (NIA, 2009; Alzheimer's Association, 2011; Park, 2009).

### 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 (Adams, Leibbrandt and Moon, 2011).

- 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

### GET CONNECTED

Finding or creating connections is a key to social activity. Social connectedness includes relationships with family, friends, co-workers and other people you interact with 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 try and seek or create an activity that is meaningful to you. By engaging with people and participating in activities that you enjoy, social activity can be easy, fun and fulfilling. Examples of social activities include:

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- 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

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

## **STAYING 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, e-mails, the Internet, typing letters and even text or video messaging are all common avenues of communication that can be immediate and easy to use. Today, even online medical services, including telemedicine, telenursing and teletherapy, allow health care professionals to check in on you at home. They may remind you of health care needs or walk you through procedures that you can safely attend to at home. Today's technology helps people daily by providing instant information, services and even fun. The Internet is available to all 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 (Adams, Leibbrandt and Moon, 2011).

It is important for everyone at every age to reflect on the things that matter most and to decide if time and energy are being balanced properly. It is also important to 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 various life transitions, including various losses, the emphasis may evolve from friends to work to family and back to friends (Barry and Madsen, 2009). Especially in later life, relationships and social activities can help you cope with life's transitions (O'Brien, 2011; Vera, 2013).

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 (Yale Medical Group, 2013).

## **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 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

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activity, including one-on-one interaction with a close friend or even a therapist, are worth the effort and can help ease depressive symptoms. To help keep you 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 market and say “hi” to the greeter every Saturday or to call a relative or friend once a week.
- **Take a class.** Local community centers, schools/colleges, Cooperative 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 to one person you may mean the world.

## 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, as 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.

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