

Keep Your Social Network Strong to Be Healthier
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You exercise, you eat right, you engagement in de-stressing activities, and your preventive care is up-to-date. But do you keep up with old friends, volunteer, and join groups with others who share your interests? If not, you are missing important health benefits. Research shows that simply spending time in social activities can help you live longer and stay healthier physically, emotionally, and cognitively:

- A University of Chicago study found that for people 69 and older, engaging in social activities can help lower blood pressure and increase “good” cholesterol.
- A study at Columbia University found that people who had had a stroke were more likely to have another one if they were socially isolated.
- Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health found that people who were more social had less memory loss than those who were less so. A study from the Rush University Alzheimer’s Disease Center in Chicago found that people with dementia who had active social lives had less cognitive decline than those who were more isolated.
- A National Institute on Aging study found that older people who were more social had less motor decline than those who were not.
- A Carnegie-Mellon study found that being social even helps protect against the common cold.

What might the reasons be for these startling results? Some of the researchers cite the “mind-body” connection and the influence that having a sense of purpose and belonging might have on the body’s stress reaction. In fact, those who were more social were found to have decreased levels of epinephrine, the “fight or flight” hormone. Also, interpersonal interactions may stimulate neural networks, leading to better cognitive functioning. In addition, those who are more social may be more physically active as they attend functions, do volunteer work, or do activities with friends.

We at the Lincoln Council on Aging have observed that living in Lincoln is a great place for people of all ages who wish to remain social. Lincoln’s tradition of civic engagement and of having a vital community life full of activities and events is perfect for the ways of being social that are most important. A number of the studies found that having more networks of social contacts and doing different kinds of socializing makes you healthier than simply spending quiet time with one or two people.

Similarly, Lincoln’s focus on volunteerism is a great asset. Being fully engaged, as you are when you work on a project or a committee or volunteer for a cause or organization

you believe in, helps create that sense of mission and purpose that seems to lead to better health.

At the same time, the fact that Lincoln tends to be spread out, with lots of land in between houses, can sometimes make it harder to overcome social isolation. Those who have trouble getting out do not always see and chat with neighbors walking by the way they might if they lived on a street with houses close together and near the sidewalk. If the house is far from the street and does not have a sidewalk, walking to visit friends and neighbors may not be possible.

New England's weather can also be a deterrent to being socially active. Those who have mobility problems or have difficulty driving in bad weather may be housebound for a number of months each year. Sometimes even receiving services like meals-on-wheels or having an in-home aide who can offer some socialization may be interrupted if it is impossible to get to the door due to ice or snow.

How can we make use of the health benefits of being social and bring the benefits of a solid social network to others in our town? First, when you prepare for retirement, think about how you will maintain your social network the same way you are ensuring that you are taking care of your financial security. Try to get involved in a variety of activities and organizations and get to know and be friendly with a diversity of people, especially while you are well. While many people remain healthy and active in to their 90s and beyond, for some, later life can bring mobility, vision, hearing, or cognitive disabilities that can make building a social network difficult. For many of us, our closest social ties are to our work colleagues, but staying in touch can be difficult when you are retired and your colleagues are still working so be sure to find activities and friends to engage you outside of work.

If you or a relative are already experiencing challenges living at home, make sure that socialization is part of the service plan just as housekeeping or personal care might be. Studies of senior centers have shown that the major benefits of attending are making new friends and having a place to go where people feel they belong. The Lincoln COA is no different. Call Pam Alberts, Assistant Director of the COA and a social worker, to find out what activities at the COA you might enjoy or to get in on one of our discussion groups. Twice a week you can even participate in her groups by phone. Make us your home away from home!

Among some of the COA's activities that are especially good for building and maintaining your healthy social network are:

- Discussion groups with a variety of themes led by Pam Alberts
- The Men's Coffee, held the third Thursday of the month at 8 am at Bemis Hall
- Interest groups, including French and Spanish conversation, a sewing circle, and a group that likes to play the ukulele
- Senior Dining, a gourmet meal served once a month at St. Anne's
- Monthly trips to area cultural, educational, and recreational sites

- The Lincoln Academy, a presentation on a diversity of topics held each Monday at 12:30
- Fitness, Tai Chi, and Tap Dancing classes
- Movies
- Special events sponsored by the Friends of the Lincoln Council on Aging, like the Top of the Town
- The COA has many volunteer opportunities, too, including monthly collating of the COA newsletter. If you have an interest in helping out, we would love to speak with you!

Of course, the COA is not the only way to get involved and be social. Lincoln has many, many organizations that have a variety of activities and volunteer opportunities. The Town government has many committees and boards that need your ideas and expertise. Just about any day or night of the week you can find some event to go to and people to meet. Make it a part of your healthy routine!