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Agewise: Friendships contribute to aging wellness

Feb 11, 2018

Sometimes I get asked why I don't move to Florida. When the temperatures drop to below freezing, southern trips seem to be on many folks' minds. I have to admit that the prospect of playing more golf is tempting.

However, the idea of starting a new life style and making new friends does not seem age-wise. I have a feeling that my network of current friendships contributes to my aging wellness, and recent research proves my hunch.

When you read this I will be enjoying a brief respite from the northern clime with fellow golfers from the Monadnock area. If you choose your friends well, some may have some Florida hide-aways to which you will be invited for a few days!



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I have often wondered if my active lifestyle with friends helps protect me against dementia, so it was helpful to my speculation to find a study which validated this notion. In a Kaiser Health News publication called "Navigating Aging," I found an answer.

Judith Graham penned an article "Good Friends Might Be Your Best Brain Booster As You Age" (Dec. 14, 2017), in which men and women over age 80 (me) with extraordinary memories (questionable) were identified for a research project at Northwestern University.

These “SuperAgers” who share a commitment to sustaining friendships were selected for having superior episodic memory for their age, demonstrated a psychological well-being and expressed greater environmental mastery, purpose in life and positive relations with others.

This unusual aging study, unlike most which focus on factors that can lead to dementia and neurodegenerative disease as people grow older, concentrated on the factors that can protect memory.

As the only institution in the world conducting this specific type of aging research, Northwestern principal investigators Changiz Gelua, Ph.D.; Emily Rogalski, Ph.D.; Marsel Mesulam, M.D. stated:

“We wanted to focus on people who have this extraordinary memory ability and then find out what else they have in common by studying them in a really comprehensive way. We looked at psychosocial factors, education, family history, physical health and the brain.”

MRI scans revealed that the SuperAgers had no significant atrophy in their cerebral cortex, the important outer layer of the brain responsible for memory, attention, language and thinking.

The scientists are hoping to use results to turn conditions like Alzheimer’s disease upside-down. Their SuperAging project grant is designed to discover non-pharmacological interventions to increase quality of life for patients with Alzheimer’s disease.

Asked about their psychological well-being, the SuperAgers reported having satisfying, warm, trusting relationships. “Social relationships are really important to this group and might play a significant role in preserving their cognition,” Rogalski said.



This result is consistent with other research reported in the American Journal of Epidemiology in 2002 that late-life engagement in social and leisure activities is associated with a decreased risk of dementia. Who would have guessed that friendship was a factor which could prove to be preventive medicine aiding healthy aging.

This revelation led me to review the positive social relationships I am engaged in on almost a daily basis. For example, I help welcome new residents to our community and make them aware of local services and activities such as church, Rotary, providing rides for others, and service to civic groups including town government which can add spice to their life as a new resident.

My interactions with friends at the Wellness Center, on the golf course, in the neighborhood, by telephone and on Facebook all contribute to healthy friendships and guard against isolation and depression. Writing this column and serving a variety of charities such as food pantry and elder affairs is satisfying and age-wise.

So here's to good friends who help me age well! As stated in a current popular TV ad:

"Dilly Dilly — cheers to the friends you can always count on!"

Owen R. Houghton, Ed.D., lives in Jaffrey and is a retired aging wellness educator sharing the care of an Alzheimer's spouse with Summerhill Assisted Living. As a member of Monadnock at Home, he is an advocate for aging well. Readers may contact him at nohoughton@myfairpoint.net.