



IS YOUR SOCIAL LIFE BAD FOR YOUR BRAIN? 3 REASONS WHY STAYING SOCIAL MATTERS TO YOUR THINKING

Cynthia R. Green, Ph.D.
President, Total Brain Health

How many friends do you have? Do you rarely see family, go out for the evening, or join your community for an event?

You may not realize it, but your social life may just be bad for your brain.

In the immortal words of Bette Midler, “you’ve got to have friends.” Little did the Divine Miss M know that in addition to our souls, she was hitting a high note on brain health as well.

A recent AARP survey found that adults 40 and over with a higher number of social connections report better brain health. Conversely, the findings suggest that the folks who are dissatisfied with their social network are significantly more likely to have concerns about their attention, reasoning, and other aspects of cognitive function, with over half (52%) more likely to complain that their memory isn’t what it was 5 years earlier than their more socially satisfied peers (AARP 2016).

Why does our social life matter to our brain’s health? When you consider the benefits we reap from regular social engagement the reasons are clear. Let’s consider just a few of the ways that a wide social network of friends, family and community is great for our brains:

- **Lack of a Social Life May Increase Your Risk for Memory Loss.** Research has shown that high levels of social contact may reduce our risk for memory loss as we age. In one study from the Harvard School of Public

LEARN MORE @ TOTALBRAINHEALTH.COM



Health, results showed that participants who reported a wider social network were much less likely to experience memory loss compared to those who had fewer social connections. There are many reasons why strong social bonds may support long-term brain vitality.

- **Time with Friends Can be a Great Workout for our Brains.** When we socialize, we work out aspects of our thinking known to decline with age, namely focus, speedy and nimble thinking, executive control, reasoning and memory. Try having a good conversation without those skills (you won't get very far!). We are also more likely to challenge ourselves with new and novel brain-building activities – going to a concert or traveling – in the company of others. Those types of activities have been shown to reduce our risk for dementia by as much as 63%. Finally feeling socially supported can help us deal more effectively with emotional distress, such as feeling anxious or depressed, which in itself can take a toll on our cognitive performance.
- **Group Training May be the Best Way to Boost Brainpower.** Looking to rev up your recall or better preserve your brain vitality? Try brain training in a group. Social-Based Brain Training (SBBT), or the use of social engagement for the promotion of improved thinking and long-term brain vitality, has been shown to boost the benefits of brain training over and above learning on our own. The overall majority of memory training interventions shown to improve performance has been provided in group settings, including the ACTIVE trial, the largest study of cognitive training in the U.S. In one study from the Netherlands that compared individual with group-based training, researchers found those in the collective training group scored significantly higher on cognitive tests and reported higher rates of stability in memory function than the individual training or control group participants. In addition, studies have shown that training with others results in lower rates of anxiety and stress, an important



finding in an older population (or, if we look at the AARP data, perhaps even those in midlife) at increased risk for loneliness, isolation and depression. These findings and others led scientists conducting a review of 31 cognitive training studies to conclude that “cognitive interventions produce maximum benefits when participants trained in groups” (Kelly et al, 2014). All good reasons to step away from the screen and look for ways to engage in brain training that is social (it’s more fun, besides!).

So go ahead and tell everyone – whether it’s dinner out, taking that trip you’ve been talking about forever, or taking a TBH Toolkit class to boost your memory together – when it comes to better brain health, there’s nothing like doing so in the company of friends!