



SOCIAL CONNECTION AND HEALTHY AGING:

Why Staying Social Matters as You Age

How meaningful relationships can support brain health, physical health, longevity, and quality of life

Healthy aging is often associated with familiar habits: staying active, eating well, getting enough sleep, and keeping up with preventive health care.

There is another factor that deserves a place on that list: staying connected to other people.

A growing body of research suggests that meaningful social connection can influence physical health, cognitive health, emotional well-being, and even longevity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies social connection as an important contributor to longer, healthier lives and notes that strong relationships can help protect against serious health conditions, including heart disease, stroke, dementia, depression, and anxiety¹.

Social connection does not mean having a packed calendar or constantly being surrounded by people. It means having the number, quality, and variety of relationships that help you feel supported, valued, and part of something larger than yourself.

As we age, maintaining those relationships can become more difficult—but perhaps more important than ever.

Why Social Connection Is Important for Healthy Aging

Socializing can sometimes be treated as entertainment: enjoyable, but optional. Research increasingly tells a different story.

A 2025 prospective study using data from more than 25,000 older adults in the UK Biobank examined whether social isolation and loneliness were associated with the likelihood of reaching age 80 without major chronic disease.

Researchers found that social isolation was associated with a 20% lower likelihood of healthy aging among women and a 14% lower likelihood among men. Women experiencing both social isolation and loneliness had an especially lower likelihood of healthy aging compared with women experiencing neither².

The findings reinforce an important distinction: living longer and aging well are not necessarily the same thing. Social connection may play a role not only in lifespan, but also in healthspan—the years we live in good health.

Social Isolation and Loneliness Are Not the Same Thing

Social isolation and loneliness are often used interchangeably, but they describe different experiences.

The CDC defines social isolation as having limited relationships, contact, or support from others. Loneliness is the subjective feeling of being alone, disconnected, or not as close to others as you would like³.

That distinction matters. Someone can live alone and feel deeply connected to friends, family, neighbors, and community. Another person can be surrounded by people—even living with a spouse—and still feel lonely.

Healthy social connection is therefore not simply about how many people are around you. Quality matters, too.

How Social Connection Supports Physical Health and Longevity

The connection between relationships and physical health is increasingly measurable.

A major 2026 study⁴ published in *Age and Ageing* examined data from more than 80,000 older adults across 31 countries. Researchers found that social isolation was associated with a 33% higher risk of all-cause death and a 26% higher risk of developing frailty. Loneliness was also associated with increased risks of frailty and mortality.

The researchers found that frailty explained part of the relationship between social disconnection and mortality, reinforcing the connection between social well-being and physical health.

The U.S. Surgeon General has likewise identified social connection as an important public health issue. Research summarized by the Surgeon General has linked poor social relationships, isolation, and loneliness with increased risks of heart disease and stroke, while stronger social connection can help improve the body's response to stress⁵.

Relationships do not replace exercise, nutritious food, sleep, or medical care. Rather, social connection appears to work alongside these other elements of healthy aging.

Social Connection, Brain Health, and Dementia Risk

Staying socially connected may also play an important role in protecting cognitive health. The 2024 Lancet Standing Commission on dementia prevention,

intervention, and care identified social isolation as one of the potentially modifiable factors associated with dementia risk⁶.

The Commission also reported that participation in social activities has been associated with decreased dementia risk. The CDC similarly identifies social isolation and loneliness among the nonmedical factors associated with higher dementia risk⁷.

Why might relationships matter to the brain? Conversation, learning, shared experiences, problem-solving, games, hobbies, and other social activities regularly ask the brain to process information and respond to new situations. Relationships also provide emotional support and can encourage other healthy behaviors, such as physical activity and participation in community life.

Socializing is not a guarantee against cognitive decline. But the evidence increasingly supports social connection as one part of a broader approach to protecting brain health as we age.

Strong Relationships May Even Influence Biological Aging

Some of the most interesting emerging research looks beyond how old someone is in years and examines how quickly the body itself is aging.

A recent research review supported by the National Institute on Aging found evidence linking strong social relationships with slower biological aging⁸. The research summarized in the report suggests that supportive family relationships, friendships, and community ties can influence biological processes associated with health and longevity.

The review also highlights an important point: different types of relationships may provide different kinds of benefits. That means healthy social connection does not have to come from one person—or one kind of relationship.

The Different Types of Social Connection That Matter

Some relationships provide deep emotional support. Others create belonging, purpose, companionship, or simply a pleasant moment in the day. All can have value.

Close Relationships

Family members, spouses, longtime friends, and other trusted people often provide our deepest sources of emotional and practical support. These are the people we call when something matters—whether the news is good or bad.

Community Connections

Clubs, volunteer organizations, faith communities, fitness groups, classes, and other shared-interest groups offer another kind of connection: belonging. Participating in something alongside other people can create routine, purpose, and opportunities to build new relationships.

Everyday Connections

Not every relationship needs to be deeply personal to matter. A conversation with a neighbor, greeting someone at breakfast, chatting before an exercise class, or seeing familiar faces during a walk can create frequent, low-pressure opportunities for interaction.

These everyday connections can be especially valuable as people age because they make social interaction part of daily life rather than something that must always be scheduled or arranged.

Why Staying Social Can Become Harder With Age

Most people do not intentionally become isolated—life changes as we naturally move through different phases.

Retirement can eliminate daily interaction with coworkers. Adult children may live in another city or state. Friends move or pass away. The loss of a spouse can dramatically change both daily routines and social circles.

Health and mobility changes can make it harder to attend activities. Driving may become stressful or no longer be an option. Even maintaining a house can consume time and energy that might otherwise be spent with other people.

The CDC identifies older adults as one of the groups at increased risk for loneliness and notes that living alone, loss of a loved one, limited transportation, and health challenges can contribute to social disconnection⁹.

The result can be gradual. Dinner with friends becomes less frequent. The weekly class becomes difficult to reach. A neighbor moves. Family visits become the primary source of social interaction. Over time, a once-full social world can quietly become smaller.

How Senior Living Can Make Social Connection Easier

One of the advantages of a senior living community is not simply that activities are available, but that connection is nearby. Instead of driving across town to see a friend, attend a fitness class, share a meal, or participate in a club, many of those opportunities may be just outside your door. That can make connection part of everyday life.

Depending on the community, opportunities might include:

- Sharing a meal with neighbors
- Joining a fitness or walking group
- Taking a class or attending a presentation
- Volunteering for a cause that matters to you
- Participating in a club based on a shared interest
- Attending concerts, performances, or outings
- Gardening or creating art alongside others
- Meeting someone for coffee
- Simply stopping to talk with a neighbor

Research supports combining connection with other healthy activities. The CDC points to walking and fitness programs as promising ways to enhance social connection among older adults¹⁰.

But a healthy community should never equate successful aging with being busy all the time. The goal is to make meaningful interaction easy and

accessible while respecting each person's need for privacy, independence, and time alone. Choice matters.

Purpose Is Part of Connection, Too

Social connection is about more than companionship—people also want to feel needed. Volunteering, mentoring, helping a neighbor, participating in a committee, sharing expertise, or contributing to a group can provide opportunities to maintain a sense of purpose while building relationships with others.

The CDC recommends volunteering, participating in community groups, getting to know neighbors, and sharing existing activities—such as exercise or cooking—with other people as practical ways to strengthen social connection¹¹.

This is one reason the strongest social opportunities are often not activities created simply to keep people occupied. They are opportunities to participate, contribute, learn, lead, help, and belong.

How to Stay Socially Connected as You Age

There is no single formula for a healthy social life. An extrovert may thrive with a full calendar and a large circle of friends. Someone else may prefer a few close relationships and occasional group activities.

What matters is whether your social life provides the connection you want. Consider asking yourself:

- Do I see or speak with people I care about regularly?
- Do I have people I can turn to when I need support?
- Do I have opportunities to meet new people?
- Am I participating in activities that give me purpose?
- Is transportation preventing me from doing things I enjoy?
- Has my social circle become smaller than I would like?

- Do I feel connected to my neighborhood or community?
- Am I spending as much time with other people as I want to?

If the answers reveal a gap, small changes can make a difference. Reconnect with an old friend. Join a group centered around something you already enjoy. Volunteer. Take a class. Invite someone to walk with you. Eat with other people more often.

And when considering where you want to live as you age, think about your social environment just as seriously as you think about your home.

Connection Is Part of a Full Life

Healthy aging is not only about adding years to life. It is about supporting health, purpose, independence, and quality of life throughout those years.

Relationships are an important part of that equation. At Touchmark, opportunities for connection are woven into daily community life—from shared dining and fitness to lifelong learning, volunteerism, interest groups, outings, and everyday conversations with neighbors.

The choice to participate always remains yours. But when connection is close at hand, staying socially engaged does not have to require elaborate planning. Sometimes it begins with walking out your door.

Learn more at www.Touchmark.com.

Research Sources

1. CDC—Social Connection
<https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/about/>
2. BMC Geriatrics/PMC—Relationships of Social Isolation and Loneliness With Healthy Aging Among Older Adults
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12016190/>
3. CDC—Health Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness
<https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/risk-factors/index.html>
4. PubMed—How Social Isolation, Loneliness and Frailty Play Roles in All-Cause Death in Later Life
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/42572000/>
5. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—Social Connection
<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/connection/index.html>
6. PubMed—Dementia Prevention, Intervention, and Care: 2024 Report of the Lancet Standing Commission
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39096926/>
7. CDC—Non-Medical Factors That Affect Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias Risk
<https://www.cdc.gov/alzheimers-dementia/php/sdoh/index.html>
8. Population Reference Bureau—More Than a Feeling: How Social Connection Protects Health in Later Life
https://www.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/0110.25_Todays-Research-on-Aging-44_Social-Ties.pdf
9. CDC—Health Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness
<https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/risk-factors/index.html>
10. CDC—Social Connection Efforts
<https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/about/what-cdc-is-doing.html>
11. CDC—Improving Social Connectedness
<https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/improving/index.html>

