Dr. Rob’s Science Connection -- Enhancing Brain Health

## Talking to a Friend Each Day May Keep the Doctor Away

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We all have different levels of social needs but recent research has shown that satisfying those varying levels of social needs can be good for our health. We know that people who rate the quality of their social support networks as being better are actually less likely to have all sorts of medical conditions. For example, social support is related to a number of health conditions including depression, strokes, heart attacks, and immune system functioning. However, many older adults, especially those living in assisted living, often have inadequate social support networks (Winningham & Pike, 2007), which appear to increase mortality rates and decrease life expectancy. In one study, known as the *Beta Blocker Heart Attack Trial*, researchers studied 2300 men and found that those who were more socially connected actually had a much lower risk of dying prematurely compared to those who were not as socially connected.

In addition to the above medical and physical outcomes associated with the level of social support and engagement, it should be noted that social engagement is mentally stimulating and related to a reduced likelihood of developing memory problems. Dr. Lisa Berkman and her colleagues have convincingly shown that older adults who are the most socially engaged have less decline in their memory ability as they age. Think about it, socializing is a mental engaging task, as you remember previous conversations, track current conversations, learn new things, and inhibit saying or thinking irrelevant things while listening to your friend. Dr. Berkman told the New York Times “The working hypothesis is that social engagement is what makes you mentally engaged…You can’t sit and withdraw if you’re constantly talking and working on things and figuring out problems in your daily life. It’s not just completing a crossword puzzle, it’s living your life.”

All of this research is a reminder to us to do what we can do to stay connected with our family and friends. We are social creatures and while it can be difficult to make new connections as we get older and experience losses, the benefits of doing so could improve our quality of life. So go out and do what you enjoy, find others who share your interests, invite people over, call people on the phone, write letters, send emails, play cards, engage in community programs, and get connected.

References

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*These articles are written for community members to educate them about brain health. The articles can be used in cognitive stimulation classes or in community newsletters. Anyone can use these articles, without requesting permission, as long as Dr. Rob Winningham is given credit. The articles can be reformatted but the text cannot be edited.*