Healthy aging requires more than just focusing on enhancing your physical fitness and proper nutrition. Those who truly thrive as older adults understand staying connected to the world around you is vital for healthy aging. Being socially connected enhances your quality of life by providing avenues for meaning and purpose.
Social Isolation

For many, growing older means a shrinking world. Our family and friends may move to other geographic locations. They may withdraw from us due to struggles with health issues, or they may pass away. When this happens to you it can be exhausting to consider how to build new relationships. Yet it is a necessity because sustaining a social connection with others is vital to your healthy aging strategy.

There is a tendency towards inactivity and social isolation as we age, which can create the potential for depression to set in. This can be debilitating and minimize your quality of life. Since being connected to others helps alleviate the symptoms, incorporating opportunities for socialization into your daily life is an essential approach to maintaining your mental health.

Connections with others can help you cope with the health changes you experience as you grow older. They can also be a source of support as you become a caregiver when the health of a loved one changes. Connections with others can help you successfully navigate the complex transitions associated with aging.

Reinforce Healthy Lifestyles

The connection between healthy aging and friendship extends beyond the emotional support it offers. A sense of connection can also be a powerful buffer when you are facing a major life change, learning to deal with a chronic condition, or facing a difficult medical diagnosis.

The old adage “Show me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are” speaks to the truth of healthy aging too. If you are socially isolated, it impacts who you are. You can fall into unhealthy lifestyle habits such as eating food that is not nutritious or engaging in excessive drinking.

Spending time with friends and family can inspire you to adopt a healthy routine. They can reinforce your engagement in fitness activities by going to an exercise class with you or become your walking partner. Being socially connected can strengthen your focus on eating well. Laughing with others can be a stress reliever and help you focus on the positive things you have in your life.

Powerful Cognitive Connections

Social contact offers benefits to help you maintain your cognitive function. Joining in social activities stimulates your mind and keeps your brain busy. Learning provides both stimulating activity and significant opportunities for social engagement.

Conversation and connection challenge your brain too. When your brain is challenged through your activities and your surroundings, the formation of new synapses (contact points) occurs. Participating in new social experiences with others can be a potent approach to enhancing your brain connections. This can be especially powerful if it is ongoing and requires a learning effort from you.

Better yet, study and speak a new language. Carrying on a conversation in another language can be an exceptionally stimulating cognitive exercise for you and your language partner. Conjugating new words and carrying on simple conversations builds new neuronal pathways and strengthens your cognitive capacity. Moreover, learning a new language offers you a fun way to connect with other people.

Final Thoughts

While your relationships will change as you grow older, think of new relationships as an evolution of your life connections, not as a replacement for those you have lost. Maintaining deep interpersonal connections and participating in social support groups will connect you to others and to yourself. Having a real sense of connection will allow you to age with vitality and meaning.
Take Action Now

- **Reach out.** Call one or two friends you have not seen in a while and catch up. Better yet, go out to lunch or dinner to engage face-to-face.

- **Use technology.** Connect with your family and friends virtually via tools like Facebook, Skype, Instagram, blogs or Caring Bridge.

- **Volunteer.** Find a local non-profit that you admire and volunteer with them. Make an effort to get to know one or two others who volunteer with the group too.

- **Try a new wellness class.** Challenge yourself to experience a new wellness offering. Find another person you can attend with, or attend on your own to meet new people with similar interests.

- **Have fun.** Get your grandchildren off their cell phones by playing a game of Scrabble or Monopoly with them.

- **Plan ahead.** Make your transitions easier by giving yourself adequate time to adjust to new goals or changes in your living environment.

**GOAL:** Select one person you have recently met and engage with them in a follow-up activity.

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**Expert Insight**

**Dennis M. Manning, M.D.,** Geriatrician, Consultant in the Division of Hospital Internal Medicine, Department of Internal Medicine and Associate Professor of Medicine at the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota.

“The aging person is challenged with loss. Yet staying connected to others is one of the best ways to thrive despite the changes of aging. Older adults should stay active in their social networks of family and friends. Regular contact with both old and new friends can be life-expanding. You can maintain your social networking and continue to do things together.

Engage in your personal growth and keep learning. Find a group to work collaboratively on a project. This can be very gratifying. Stay in touch with your faith and spirituality. Even exercising with others makes it a lot more fun!

We are all part of a mosaic of connections. When you engage with others you will derive a sense of belonging. This connection provides social equity upon which you can call, when you need it. The key is to do this regularly and not in a haphazard manner. Join a book club, or a bowling league. Don’t bowl alone.”

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