

# Higher levels of social activity decrease the risk of cognitive decline

In short, if you want to keep your brain healthy, it turns out that visiting friends, attending parties, and even going to church might be just as good for you as crossword puzzles. It's rather along the lines of... use it... or lose it.



Keep up your social life if you want to stay mentally sharp. (Image: Jan Jankovic at cs.wikipedia)

According to research conducted at Rush University Medical Centre, frequent social activity may help to prevent or delay cognitive decline in old age. The study has just been posted online in the *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*.

The researchers were especially careful in their analysis to try to rule out the possibility that cognitive decline precedes, or causes, social isolation, and not the reverse.

## Don't be afraid, go out and meet people

"It's logical to think that when someone's cognitive abilities break down, they are less likely to go out and meet friends, enjoy a camping trip, or participate in community clubs. If memory and thinking capabilities fail, socialising becomes difficult," says lead researcher Bryan James, PhD, postdoctoral fellow in the epidemiology of aging and dementia in the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Centre. "But our findings suggest that social inactivity itself leads to cognitive impairments."

The study included 1138 older adults with a mean age of 80 who are participating in the Rush Memory and Aging Project, ongoing longitudinal study of common chronic conditions of aging. They each underwent yearly evaluations that included medical history and neuropsychological tests.

Social activity was measured based on a questionnaire that asked participants whether, and how often, in the previous year they had engaged in activities that involve social interaction. For example, did they go to restaurants, sporting events or teletrack (off-track betting) or played bingo; went on day trips or overnight trips; did volunteer work; visited relatives or friends; participated in groups such as the Knights of Columbus; or attended religious services.

## Why social activity plays a role in the development of cognitive problems is not clear

Cognitive function was assessed using a battery of 19 tests for various types of memory (episodic, semantic and working memory), as well as perceptual speed and visuospatial ability.

At the start of the investigation, all participants were free of any signs of cognitive impairment. Over an average of five years, however, those who were more socially active showed reduced rates of cognitive decline. On average, those who had the highest levels of social activity (the 90th percentile) experienced only one quarter of the rate of cognitive decline experienced by the least socially active individuals.

Other variables that might have accounted for the increase in cognitive decline - such as age, physical exercise, and health - were all ruled out in the analysis.

Why social activity plays a role in the development of cognitive problems is not clear. According to James, one possibility that "social activity challenges older adults to participate in complex interpersonal exchanges, which could promote or maintain efficient neural networks in a case of 'use it or lose it.'"

Future research is needed to determine whether interventions aimed at increasing late-life social activity can play a part in delaying or preventing cognitive decline, James said.

Other researchers at Rush involved in the study were Robert Wilson, PhD, Lisa Barnes, PhD, and David Bennett, MD.

Source: Rush University Medical Centre

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