

Having Friends Can Help Seniors Fend Off Memory Loss

A study by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health reports that older adults who have an active social life may have a slower rate of memory decline. This study follows others that have found that social interaction may reduce the risk of dementia and cognitive decline. It would appear that the steps taken by the developers and management of active adult communities to encourage such social interaction are not simply giving residents a busier and happier lifestyle, but also is helping them fend off memory loss.

This study used data from the Health and Retirement Study from the years 1998 to 2004. That survey looked at a large, representative group of U.S. residents 50 and older. It assessed memory every other year, beginning in 1998, by reading a list of ten common nouns to the respondents and asking them to recall as many as possible right away and after a five minute delay. The participants also were rated for social integration based on marital status, volunteer activities and contact with parents, children and neighbors.

The individuals with the highest scores for social integration had the slowest rate of memory decline – less than half the rate for those with the weakest social networks. Senior researcher Lisa Berkman pointed out that previous studies have shown that people with more social ties have lower mortality rates as well. “As our society ages and has more and more older people” she said, “it will be important to promote their engagement in social and community life to maintain their well being.”

The full study, which received support from the National Institute of Aging, was published in the July 2008 issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

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