

Caregiver's Corner Column (February 2014)

The Importance of Social Interaction

By Mary Beth Barkeley
Home Instead Senior Care

Research has shown that social interaction offers older adults many benefits. Staying socially active and maintaining interpersonal relationships can help the elderly maintain good physical and cognitive function. Therefore, under the stress and strain of caregiving maintaining social engagement as a family caregiver is especially important.

Scientists believe and agree that keeping social and busy “evokes changes in the brain that protect against cognitive decline. This, in turn, influences physical processes regulated by the brain such as cellular immunity or managing the body’s defense against disease.” (Harvard University Gazette, William J Cromie. January, 1999.)

The odds of experiencing cognitive decline are approximately twice as great in those displaying no social ties than those who had frequent contact with relatives and friends, attended religious services, or participated in regular social activities. The effects of socializing can have as much or greater of an effect on health as physical fitness. This speaks to those too frail or disabled to exercise regularly.

The number of Americans ninety and older will increase from 1 million in 1999 to over ten million by 2050. To guarantee a higher quality of life for these individuals, our society needs to embrace well designed living spaces, accessible transportation, and opportunities that maximize social engagement.

Delayed retirement, part-time work, volunteerism and late-life learning programs will serve as key ingredients to helping and empowering our nation’s elderly.

It is thought that social connectedness helps the immune system, lowers stress hormones and offers psychological benefits. Other possible benefits include:

- Potentially reduced risk for cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis and Alzheimer’s disease
- Lower blood pressure
- Lower risk of depression
- People who continue to maintain close friendships and find ways to interact with their environments live longer than those who tend toward isolation.

Want to stay socially engaged? Here are a few tips:

Start by staying in touch with friends. Try to get together frequently. Volunteer at church or at a local school. Visit one of our many senior centers in the area to participate in their community programming. Join a group fitness class, where you can experience both physical and social benefits. Our community offers many of these classes and information sessions, which both serve as opportunities to socialize and learn. Take a

class to learn something new such as a foreign language. Reach out at church or in your neighborhood and host BOCCE ball or a board game night! Also, here are a few local groups to check out:

- OLLI: Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Aquinas College
(email: olliinfo@aquinas.edu or phone: 616-632-2430)
- CALL: Calvin Academy for Lifelong Learning
(<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/call/> email: call@calvin.edu)
- Interest groups include: knitting, gardening, brass ensemble and birding)
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- The January Series at Calvin College (www.calvin.edu/January 2014 phone: 616-331-7189)
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- The Grand Rapids Community College Older Learner's Center
(www.grcc.edu/olc email: mfaber@grcc.edu)
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- GVSU-Grand Forum Book Discussion Group (email: learn@gvsu.edu/learn]
Phone: 616-331-7180)
- Senior Neighbors (www.seniorneighbors.org)

RSVP: Retired Senior Volunteer Program

(<http://www.seniorneighbors.org/rsvp.html>) Phone: 616-459-9509

Check out your local church, public library or senior center for activities in your area. You will be amazed at the variety of opportunities available. Stay social, stay connected, and stay healthy as a family caregiver.

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.