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**Special Issue**

**YOUR  
AMAZING  
BRAIN**

**Boost**  
Your **BRAIN**  
**FUNCTION**

**Why Friendship Is  
Good for Your Mind**

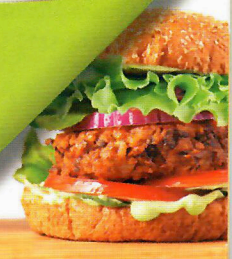
HOW TO IMPROVE  
YOUR MEMORY  
AND  
**Stay Sharp**

**EQ vs. IQ**  
WHICH IS MORE  
IMPORTANT?



**What to Eat for Better Brainpower**

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# Your Brain Wants More Friends

## WHY YOUR MIND THRIVES When You Socialize

**Making friends as an adult isn't always easy, but it's worth the effort for long-term brain health and overall well-being.**

By Christa M. Hines

**W**hen I was a young mom with two children under the age of two, my husband's job relocated us to a new city. I looked forward to exploring our community and meeting new people. But as the weeks and months wore on, I found myself stuck in a sort of lonely limbo, with lots of uncertainty about how to go about forming new friendships.

I'd taken a break from my career to get us settled. We had no family nearby, my husband was frequently out of town on business, and social media was in its infancy. That meant days would go by without me seeing or talking with anyone in person except my adorable, but demanding, young charges.

I began to struggle, feeling listless and anxious. One dismal winter morning, desperate to escape





the house, I loaded up my sons to go to the library. As luck would have it, I struck up a conversation with another mom who invited me to check out the mother's group she was involved in.

After attending the first gathering, I felt a surge of relief. It was energizing chatting with interesting women who were in a similar season of life. With a renewed sense of purpose, I blew the cobwebs off my calendar and populated our schedule with activities. My children were getting the socialization they needed—and so was I. Not only did my new tribe help me feel happier and more at ease, I was also able to show up mentally stronger for my sons.

My experience taught me an important truth: Humans aren't wired to live in isolation. Social engagement is critical to our overall well-being, and it's essential to greasing the cogs and wheels of our brains, no matter what our age. Here's how.



## FRIENDSHIP muscles up brain functioning.

Social engagement is like a workout for the brain, flexing our emotional and intellectual abilities.

"When having a conversation, you are required to attend to details, read social cues, think flexibly, adapt your response to the demands of the conversation and respond using appropriate language," says Tanisha Hill-Jarrett, PhD, a neuropsychologist and assistant professor at the University of South Florida, Tampa.

Multiple studies suggest that the more we strengthen these neural pathways, the better we protect our brains from debilitating diseases, like dementia and Alzheimer's.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, social isolation, which occurs when we have few, if any, daily interactions with others, can increase the risk of dementia by 50 percent.

"Isolation negatively impacts memory, visual-spatial skills, executive function, language and speech. The more isolated people are, the less likely they will have good cognitive function," says Jiong Shi, MD, PhD, director of clinical trials at the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health.



### Try it!

Engage in conversation with elderly loved ones and neighbors. Follow an interest or new hobby

by taking a class or joining a group. Seek volunteer opportunities, which not only offer interactions that increase brain functioning, but also can provide a sense of meaning and purpose. Many volunteer organizations provide resources to groups that tend to be at risk for social isolation, including the elderly and the marginalized.







## FRIENDSHIP reduces stress.

Think about the last time you met up with a friend for lunch. Maybe you commiserated over a problem, confided in each other, or shared funny stories. You likely walked away from that exchange feeling more relaxed and optimistic. That's not an accident.

The brain thrives on these types of interactions, rewarding us with dopamine, a chemical that makes us feel good and lowers the stress hormone cortisol in the body.

Studies find that people who feel lonely secrete higher levels of cortisol. According to a study of fourth graders published in the journal *Child Development*, children who were excluded from their peer group exhibited higher cortisol levels, even compared to those who were bullied. It seems that the body's reaction to social exclusion is even worse than receiving negative attention.

Isolation and loneliness is extremely stressful on the mind and body, putting us at risk for multiple health problems, including depression, obesity, heart disease, and premature death.

"People who are lonely have a heightened biological stress response [fight or flight], leading to higher levels of stress hormones, heightened markers of inflammation, and poorer immune function," Hill-Jarrett says.

### Try it!

Make time for playful activities with your kids, grandkids, or friends. Play releases endorphins and reduces stress hormones while also inviting laughter and camaraderie. Don't have anyone to pal around with? Research area groups that share your interests. From gardening and book clubs to pickleball and rock climbing, there are groups that fit every personality, lifestyle, ability, and interest.



## FRIENDSHIP enhances whole-body health.

Our social circle can be influential when it comes to how we treat our bodies. If you tend to hang out with health-conscious people, for example, you're more likely to pay attention to your health too. But left to our own devices, we're less likely to prioritize our well-being. Research suggests that social isolation leads to worse health choices, like exercising less, eating fewer fruits and vegetables, and turning to alcohol and tobacco.

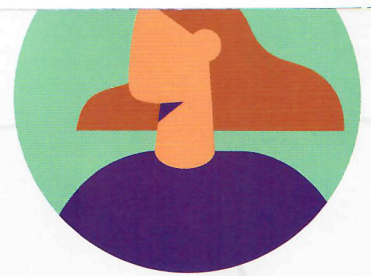
"Diet and exercise can influence cardiovascular and lung health, both of which are linked to brain wellness," Hill-Jarrett says. "People who socialize are more likely to be physically active and engage with others in activities that promote overall physical wellness and cardiovascular health, which is good for maintenance of brain health."

### Try it!

Ask friends, neighbors, or acquaintances if they'd like to join you for weekly walks or bike rides. Also, check online and social media for local healthy living and fitness groups. These groups can offer support, personal accountability, and motivation as you reach toward your health goals, while also providing the energizing interaction your brain craves.







## FRIENDSHIP increases life satisfaction.

Loneliness puts people at greater risk for mood issues, like depression and anxiety. While three in five Americans reported suffering from loneliness prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 social distancing requirements, although necessary, exacerbated the trend.

A 2021 survey conducted by Harvard University suggests that younger Americans feel lonelier than ever, with 36 percent of respondents reporting feelings of loneliness. Among those, 61 percent were young adults between the ages of 18–25, and 51 percent were mothers with young children. Depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues are hitting the younger generations particularly hard.

This may come as a surprise considering younger people are especially adept at technology and are huge consumers of social media. But while social isolation and loneliness often go hand in hand, a person experiencing loneliness may not be socially isolated. They can have an extensive social network online and off, but have few, if any, people they feel comfortable confiding in.

“The type and quality of online interaction is important,” Hill-Jarrett says. “More shallow interactions are less likely to facilitate the feeling of connection and meaningfulness than an online conversation with someone you know well or someone you can have significant dialogue with.”

While social media can provide a mood boost when you make a new connection or when you enjoy a meaningful exchange, it lacks the emotional, vocal, and visual cues that we get from in-person interactions.

“Technology is an alternative, and I think it’s better than nothing. But it’s not nearly as good as in person. When I talk to my patients, especially elderly people, they feel it’s very artificial,” Shi says. “They still want a hands-on kind of relationship. The best social interaction is regular, in-depth social interaction.”

### Try it!

Whether online or in person, invest time in maintaining quality, long-term friendships

instead of those that are negative or stressful. According to a Michigan State University study, as we age, our friendships are greater predictors of health and happiness than our family relationships. Supportive friends can enhance long-term health and happiness, whereas strained friendships can put you at a higher risk for chronic illness. That said, your grandmother still wants to hear from you, so give her a call or take her to lunch. Your brain—and hers—will thank you.



## LONELINESS SIGNS TO WATCH FOR in Loved Ones

- ◆ Expresses negative self-worth, doubt, or hopelessness
- ◆ Has friends/acquaintances, but says they don't feel close to anyone
- ◆ Doesn't reciprocate your multiple attempts to interact/engage
- ◆ Seems more withdrawn or spends more time alone
- ◆ Eats too much or too little
- ◆ Sleeps too much or too little
- ◆ Loses interest in activities/hobbies they used to enjoy

SOURCES: TANISHA HILL-JARRETT, PHD, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA; JIONG SHI, MD, PHD, CLEVELAND CLINIC LOU RUVO CENTER FOR BRAIN HEALTH



Christa M. Hines is an author and journalist who considers herself a “professional question asker.”