

Socialize

Taking steps to establish and maintain a healthy lifestyle will help to preserve and protect our retirement goals. An important component of a healthy lifestyle is socializing. There are now some compelling statistics to help encourage plenty of culture and community.

As we age, the effect of social isolation and loneliness increases, and this is experienced

by as many as forty percent of aging adults. Why is this such a problem? Research indicates that loneliness often equals depression and accelerates cognitive decline (our ability to remember). Sadly, cognitive decline is among the leading reasons people enter institutional care. Anything we can do to lower this risk will be of benefit.

The Nun Study

Over thirty years ago, a study called the Nun Study of Aging and Alzheimer's Disease was launched to examine the onset of Alzheimer's among a group of nuns. They seemed to be functionally just fine, but after they passed on, their brains were donated to the study and examined. The results showed indications that many of the nuns had Alzheimer's, yet they had not exhibited the signs of the disease while they were alive. How could the nuns have the disease but not show the signs? It is believed that some people are able to cope with it better than others by keeping their brains active and engaging socially in a meaningful way.

How can you stay meaningfully engaged?

You do so by staying involved in life. Volunteering, cultivating high-quality relationships, and being involved in social groups provide you with benefits that can improve your overall well-being.

The most well-known benefits include:

- Enhanced mental health that helps with a positive outlook on life
- A sense of belonging when doing something meaningful together
- Better self-esteem from contributing to others outside of yourself
- Improved physical health from better eating with friends and family
- Increased cognitive functioning by sharpening our minds with learning, processing, and responding to the world around us
- Accountability to stay well
- The cultivation of purposeful living by looking forward to interactions and gaining a sense of fulfillment

Studies show that regular social engagement may actually delay the onset of dementia symptoms. With all of these benefits, it should be clear that your social interaction is a crucial part of your health plan throughout your life.

An aspect of the studies to highlight is the benefit of how meaningful we find our interactions to be. For example, being engaged in religious or charitable organizations, civic

groups, or other circles whose purpose has an impact on how you find meaning—any of these will have positive impacts on your health as well as a good way to expand the age range of your circle of friends. It is also important to recognize that we often make friends within our age-group, but this group shrinks as we age. So, it is vital to make friends with folks 5, 10, 15 or even more years younger than yourself.

How are you doing?

Take an honest look at your level of social interactions, then make decisions on how you can improve. Let's define how we rate social interactions:

- **Frequent:** You have daily, meaningful interactions with others. You have a network of people with whom you regularly interact.
- **Moderate:** You occasionally attend family gatherings or talk with neighbors, but lack deeper conversation and meaningful relationships.
- **Minimal:** You only engage in essential interactions. You only interact with a limited number of other individuals.

Whatever level you are, make a plan to move up to the next level by improving the quantity and quality of your social interactions.

Healthy Lifestyle: Socialize

My current meaningful social interactions are: (Select one)

- ☐ Frequent (daily meaningful interactions)
- ☐ Moderate (family and some social gatherings; somewhat superficial)
- ☐ Minimal (only essential interactions with others or with limited individuals)

My plan to increase meaningful social interactions includes: (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Volunteering in charitable/religious service
- ☐ Joining/engaging with hobby or civic groups
- ☐ Other

Notes regarding my Socialize Plan:
