

## **Social Connections and Healthy Aging**

The importance of friends and family to our health is well understood by American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN). Though the specific traditions of tribes, pueblos, nations, and bands can differ quite a bit between one another, we as AI/AN share our respect for, inclusion of, and focus on Elders as a common link between our communities.

In today's culture, many Elders are separated from their communities and therefore from some of this tradition. While we may overlook it, the connections with our families and friends are important to our health and wellbeing as Elders. Research is demonstrating the importance of social interactions to the physical and mental health of Elders, but Elders may face challenges maintaining relationships for a variety of reasons.

### **Making and Maintaining Relationships**

During childhood, it is easier to make friends. Many will find their “best friend forever”, but then later take different paths in school, develop new interests, start careers and families, and drift apart from these friends over time. It is even more difficult for Elders, because the process of aging and moving through the stages of life tends to reduce the number of connections we have to other people. Through the aging of our children and their pursuit of goals outside the community and our own changes in careers and retirement, our connections to family, friends, coworkers, and others may weaken over time. In the cycle of life, our own Elders pass themselves, also reducing our connections within the community. In spite of the way time can separate us from others, many still have old friends with whom they have kept in contact with over the years. It is the maintenance of these friendships, along with family and new relationships that can help – or hurt - an Elder's health. (1)



### **Health Implications of being Connected Socially**

Research has shown that visiting with friends and family can mean a lot more for Elders than having a good time. Elders who have more of what is known as “social capital” may have better health than those who do not. “Social capital”

means the connection, trust, and participation an Elder has with their community. Elders who live in areas where they have high social capital have much better mobility than those who do not, as having trust in the safety of the community and living near neighbors who are willing to help can make them feel safer to walk around and spend time outside of the home.

Elders living in communities with stronger social capital are up to 22% more likely to get screened for diseases at the age recommended by health professionals, as they are also more likely to have better health information and support from other people than those in areas with low social capital. This is thought to be because trust and engagement with others in the community leads to the sharing of health information and knowledge. Those Elders with strong social connections have also been shown to have rates of disability 43% lower than those with weaker social ties. (1)

In addition to delaying potential physical decline, Elders who are socially active may also reduce their risk of cognitive decline (knowing, perceiving, problem solving, creativity, thinking, etc.). Researchers found that physical and mental health declined slowly in Elders who had reported:



1. high social involvement which decreased slowly over time, or;
2. moderate social involvement which increased over time.

However, for those Elders who reported low social involvement, their health declined more rapidly. In one study, cognitive decline was 70% faster in those with poor social connections when compared to those with regular social interactions. (1)(2)

Other research has demonstrated that people exposed to stressful situations have smaller increases in blood pressure, heart rates, and stress-related brain activity when they have a friend or family member along with them for support compared to those who are by themselves facing a stressful situation. Those with strong social networks have even been demonstrated to be less likely to get sick with the common cold than those who have weaker connections to others. (3)

The research also leads to a stark conclusion for Elders: Researchers from Brigham Young University and the University of North Carolina have determined that poor social connections can make someone 50% more likely to die than someone with good social connections, a risk of death about the same as that which smokers have when compared to non-smokers. (3)

While not a guarantee, it is clear that social interaction and connections with friends and family are very much an important part of an Elder's health, even if the exact reasons why are still not yet known and are being researched. But it does seem clear that an Elder surrounded with friends and family is one who is helping to maintain their own health, as well as the health of those around them.

### **Improving Social Connections**

For AI/AN Elders, the community and its traditional events can help keep one engaged with friends and family because of the important role we play in our traditions. For those living outside of traditional communities in the cities or suburbs, however, becoming disconnected from people may be easier. There are a number of different ways in which an Elder can increase their social activity and engagement to help support their own health and that of others.



One of the available tools is the internet and computer or smartphone technology. The internet and social networking websites can help Elders to connect with old friends, stay in touch with family, and meet new people. Incredibly, Elders who are active online are 30% less likely to be depressed than those who are not online, so even when distance or circumstance may make it difficult to keep in touch with loved ones, technology can still be beneficial in a real way. Some places to consider visiting online include:

- Well-known social media sites like **Facebook.com**, which are easy to use and can help Elders new to computers to become more familiar with the internet. Facebook is best known for connecting family and friends, but it also has social groups based on interests and hobbies as well as groups

supporting a cause or political interest. It is the largest social network ever created, with one billion users worldwide.

- Other websites can help Elders find groups of people with shared interests who hold group meetings and events. **Meetup.com** is a website used by the young and Elders alike across the world. It can help Elders to find other groups with widely-varying interests in their community or communities nearby to meet new people who share the same hobbies and interests.(4)

## **Staying Socially Engaged**

While the internet makes it easy to connect with others, there are many ways to connect with others and stay socially active offline too.

- Community and traditional events are a great way to stay engaged with friends and family, and to help pass on sacred traditions to the young ones.
- Local resources like libraries and senior and community centers often have fun or educational events that may be of interest. Book clubs, line dancing, financial planning workshops, painting, billiards and board games – there is something for just about everyone!
- Your local Area Agency on Aging provides free and low-cost meals for Elders. This is a great way to share a meal and converse with others and meet your nutritional needs as well.
- Volunteering to help a cause is a great way to help other people, the community, and meet others with similar interests. You can reach out to local nonprofit groups, volunteer programs such volunteer match or elder helpers, or national organizations to see if they need help.
- Hosting events for your friends and family can encourage everyone to come and visit, and have fun.

Sources:

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