

“Staying Socially Connected”

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As we age, we tend to become creatures of habit - even more so than we probably were in our younger days. While routines are comforting, [research](#) tells us that one of the habits many of us adopt as we mature is the tendency to become disconnected with friends and family on a purely social level (as opposed to a sense of obligation or responsibility). With that in mind, [brain researchers have discovered](#) that when we consciously develop new habits and activities we can actually jumpstart our trains of thought onto new, innovative tracks. Reconnecting, and consequently becoming more socially active, may just do the trick!

A recent [survey](#) conducted on behalf of [VTech® Communications, Inc.](#) examined the issues facing caregivers and seniors as older adults strive to age independently. The research found that caregivers worried most about the time seniors were alone, while seniors missed an active social life. A total of 41 percent of seniors interviewed said that their top challenge was not being as active or social as they would like. This top concern overshadowed their worries about financial issues or other realities of aging. This is truly groundbreaking information considering the media has always emphasized the size of our “nest egg” as we age and rarely considers the impact of social engagement.

Additional [research](#) also indicates that social disengagement and loneliness are often considered to be routinely associated with physical limitations causing us to become even more isolated. I recently wrote a blog about the benefits of [livable communities](#) and making sure there are activities available that don’t require getting in a car and therefore enhance the opportunities for mature adults to be socially connected regardless of your current health status.

Unfortunately, staying socially connected isn’t as easy as just scheduling time. Even if you happen to have a lot of flexibility, your friends or family may not. So that said, schedule ahead and stick to a social calendar just like you would a work schedule. It takes a time investment to be social, but the rewards are immense.

Here are some tips to help you get the most out of staying socially connected:

- 1.) **Pick up the phone:** It’s easy to email or comment on someone’s Facebook post, but how about going through your contact list and surprising someone with an actual phone call? We all have easy access to make a call, but quite often we don’t actually reach out and spend the time to catch up. And now it is easier than ever with phones specifically designed for seniors, such as the [CareLine phone system](#). In our digital age, hearing someone’s voice can be a refreshingly warm experience!
- 2.) **Learn how to use Skype or FaceTime:** Free, easy and dependable video communication is widely available with just a tablet or even a smartphone. If you can video chat with your grandchildren every weekend, it’s a seamless way to

catch up on their lives. These calls can be short and sweet, but just seeing your friends' or loved ones' faces can still be very satisfying.

- 3.) **When spending time with someone, try to be in the moment:** Though you can't actually *stretch* time, you can increase the quality of time if there's nothing urgent scheduled. When you have the opportunity to meet a friend in person, make it a lengthy lunch date, a shopping trip or a day on the links. If you like baseball, nine innings are perfect for catching up.
- 4.) **Connect with people who share a hobby:** Hobbies can be very enriching and relaxing. Being with other people who share your enthusiasm for gardening or antique cars is one of life's simple pleasures. Having trouble finding like-minded folks in your area? Ask around at your local community center. You can also try online forums for your hobby or post a [meet-up](#) in your area.

In addition, taking time to volunteer, exercise or get involved in a new field will open doors to socializing. My father has always been a gym enthusiast and in addition to his intense [weight training workouts](#), he has a close-knit group at his health club that he sees on a regular basis. Working at a food co-op or animal shelter would be ideal for those looking for a regular activity that offers a tremendous opportunity to interact with others. In the case of the animal shelter, extensive [studies](#) have indicated that exposing older adults to animals reduces their sense of loneliness considerably.

During your [30 Bonus Years](#), it's an ideal time to get involved in a cause that you've always wanted to spend more time doing. Getting more hands-on and involved with an organization you may have financially supported over the years is great for your spirits. Immersing yourself in a cause can also re-define your purpose in life and connect you with people that are from a younger (or older) generation.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that [technology](#) does help keep older adults socially connected, especially if you live in a remote area. The key is to treat social media - or discussion forums - in a similar manner as if you're having a conversation. Don't just be a passive observer. Use private messaging, post your thoughts and start discussion threads – get involved in the rapport.

Social media is also an excellent way to socialize and reconnect with people from your past. Perhaps now is the time to say hello to someone who was an important influence in your life. Be sure to share how he or she made an impact. You might be surprised at how much that individual appreciates you having taken the time to reach out. In my case, I recently ran across one of my high school teachers on Facebook, and she was shocked I remembered her. (Actually, I was more impressed she remembered me as the subject she taught was definitely not my best!)

There's no doubt that taking the time to connect with people is essential for living well as you age. You don't grow as an individual if you simply disengage. By exposing yourself to people with different outlooks on life you can open up a whole new world. What are

you waiting for? Pickup the phone and call a friend or family member you haven't seen in awhile and make a plan to get out of the house.