Stay socially active: It may be good for mind as well as body

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By Gary Rotstein

It’s often suggested that social isolation is one of the worst things that can happen to older adults — that they are more likely to live longer, healthier and happier by remaining active with a network of friends and activities.

A new report from the Global Council on Brain Health raises the additional possibility that staying socially engaged helps maintain thinking skills and slow cognitive decline. The council, an international group of researchers and health professionals sponsored by AARP, examined existing data to produce a report that contains various socialization recommendations for seniors.

“We know that loneliness and social isolation can increase physical health risks for old people,” said Sarah Lock, the council’s executive director. “The GCBH’s consensus that people who are socially engaged have a lower risk for cognitive decline shows us just how important social connections are to brain health.”

The report comes out at the same time as a new AARP consumer survey that found nearly four of 10 adults ages 40 or older say they lack social connections. The problem of social isolation and loneliness in older Americans is the theme of a national campaign that was launched in November by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging in collaboration with the AARP Foundation.

The council’s new report includes 12 recommendations for social engagement, some of which seem, well, rather obvious, but we’ll go ahead and list them anyway in case they’re helpful:

1. Focus on relationships or social activities you enjoy most.
2. If you have no one to turn to for social activities, use professional assistance like telephone hotlines, drop-in centers, conversations with clergy, etc.
3. If feeling lonely, seek out new connections or opportunities.
4. If barriers like mobility or safety problems make it difficult to get out to interact, ask for help from someone you know.
5. Keep in touch frequently with at least one trustworthy confidante you can count on.
6. Even if married, foster other relationships in order to have additional connections besides your spouse.

7. Maintain regular communication, whether in person or by phone or email, with a network of relatives, friends and neighbors.

8. Volunteer to help individuals or organizations that can use your companionship or abilities.

9. Maintain intergenerational connections so you’re in touch with younger people as well, whether grandchildren or students you mentor at a local school or program.

10. Try adding relationships or social activities by visiting new locations.

11. Be willing to expand activities through signing up for organized classes, clubs or programs.

12. Consider starting your own new group to fill a void in a type of social activity that’s lacking in your community.

The report defined and described its recommended social engagement as “interacting with others, feeling connected to other people, doing purposeful activities with others and/or maintaining meaningful social relationships.” If you’re not doing any of that, you might want to work on it — for your own good.

**Upcoming Events in Aging**

A free six-week class is starting up in March on the South Side to help family caregivers learn to manage stress and take better care of themselves — help that is also supposed to end up benefiting the loved one they assist.

The Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging has been sporadically offering the caregiver training series, which was described in [this Aging Edge article](#) in September. The program is for nonprofessionals, with advance registration required because space is limited.

Called “Powerful Tools for Caregivers,” the class will take place from 1 to 3 p.m. on Thursdays from March 2 to April 6 at the AAA office, 2100 Wharton St., second floor.

For more information or to register, call 412-350-4996.