**MEMORY MOMENT**

People often ask us "Is there any way to prevent dementia?" While there is a lot we still don't know about these diseases, research is developing ways to reduce the risk of dementia as well as many other chronic diseases. Over the next several months, this article series will focus on various strategies for better health. This month, we focus on socialization!

**SOCIAL ISOLATION INCREASES DEMENTIA RISK  
But socialization in middle age and late life reduces the risk!**

By Shannon Nosbisch, CDP, DCS

Social isolation is a silent killer—as dangerous to health as smoking. National and global health organizations have underscored the hidden, deadly, and pervasive hazards stemming from feeling alone and abandoned. This is according to grandchallengesforsocialwork.org.

By the time we are 80 years old, all of us are more likely to have some changes in our brains. But some people with those changes will have memory loss and some won’t. Rush University Alzheimer’s Disease Center in Chicago did a study of people whose brains had large numbers of plaques and tangles – changes in nerve cells that are hallmarks of Alzheimer’s. Some of these people developed the symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease – memory loss and confusion – while others did not. The difference was those people who had larger social networks had the same hallmarks, but not the symptoms of memory loss, etc. These people had built up their “cognitive reserve”. The concept of cognitive reserve refers to the brain’s flexibility and capacity to use resources in different ways to solve new problems and challenges.

Socialization is one way to build up your cognitive reserve. Socializing in your 50s and 60s and into later life can reduce your risk of dementia by 12%. Socializing puts the brain to work. It allows our brains to work and form connections between cells, keeping those cells stimulated and less likely to die.

Having a conversation requires:

\*Listening and processing information,  
\*Assigning a meaning and context to the information,  
\*Identifying and interpreting body language cues,  
\*Accessing our memory to extract information relevant to the conversation  
\*Controlling impulses and reactions to maintain appropriate behavior during the conversation.  
(ageinplace.org)

Not all social interactions have the same connection to cognitive health; therefore, distinguishing between types of social interactions are essential. [Researchers](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/active-social-life-delay-memory-loss-us-elderly/) have noted that just living with family members – merely cohabitating – does not decrease one’s likelihood of developing dementia because it does not provide the right type of social interaction to assure positive cognitive benefits.

To reap the potential benefits of social interactions, individuals must be engaged and participate in social activities outside the family. Social activities include sharing meals, conversations, playing games, attending lectures, and exercising, to name a few. Social engagement actually encourages the other healthy behaviors such as exercising and stress reduction. (Psychologytoday.com)

The Alzheimer’s Association advocates that sports, cultural activities, emotional support, and personal relationships, collectively appear to have a defensive effect against dementia.

Stimulating the mind and body to remain socially engaged include the following activities:

* Staying active in the workplace
* Volunteering in community groups and causes
* Joining bridge clubs, Tai Chi groups, dancing clubs, walking groups, book clubs, gardening groups, or other community social groups
* Traveling and meeting new people and experiencing new cultures

I know the last year has been difficult for socialization, but 2021 is a new year and we can get back to being with friends and enjoying activities with others that build cognitive reserve. Enjoy your socializing!!!

*Effingham Area Alzheimer's Awareness (EAAA) is a volunteer-run, not-for-profit organization founded to provide education and support to all families, caregivers, and people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia in Effingham County and the surrounding area. For more information about Effingham Area Alzheimer’s Awareness, check out the website at* [*www.effinghamalz.org*](http://www.effinghamalz.org/)*. If you are a caregiver & have specific questions or situations you would like information on, please feel free to call Shannon Nosbisch at 217-663-0010 or Amy Sobrino at 618-363-8372.*