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Personal
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HEALTHY LONGEVITY Healthy Communities



Three decades of research on social and mental health demonstrates that people who are part of a social network have a reduced risk of mortality; social relationships have a greater effect on reducing mortality than smoking cessation, low blood pressure, or activity levels.¹ Social engagement is also correlated with better cognitive health and psychological well-being in older adults.² However, many individuals today are living alone, living longer than their partners, and do not live near immediate or extended family. Leaving the workforce can also mean a loss of many social interactions and relationships during retirement age. Social isolation and loneliness result in less health-promoting behaviors and depression.³ The promotion of social support and **healthy communities** for older adults is not just ancillary but critical to promoting healthy longevity.

Digital connected technologies present many opportunities to boost social relationships, the most obvious being the use of email, social media, video and audio communications. However, older age groups currently have the lowest rates of digital technology adoption due to a lack of skills, lack of confidence, or frustration with new devices and ever-changing social media platforms.⁴ Simplified internet platforms can help aging adults stay connected with family, friends, hobbies and interests. For example Samsung's Breezie tablet platform for senior care communication includes games and puzzles for cognitive exercises interlaced with community and healthcare provider communication along with simplified internet access. Tapestry is a platform that condenses social media, photos and email into an easily-accessible simplified interface for seniors unfamiliar with internet navigation. Gociety and GreatCall do the same for a smartphone interfaces and also include remote monitoring features and mobile

medical alerts. These and other tools not only present opportunities for older adults to learn new skills that help maintain cognitive function but also help maintain critical social and practical connections with their community, families, and the world.

Taking digital communication a step further are new forms of in-home communications systems like OhmniLab's telecommunications robot. It allows users to stay connected with family and friends through an audio-visual robotic interface. Amazon's new Echo Show interface for the Alexa personal assistant can initiate or receive live video calls with voice command and the Marvee platform works with Alexa technology to streamline communication between family members to send messages, requests, and updates. Advances in audio-visual communications systems will make digital calls and interactions with family and friends a more integral part of life for older adults in the future.

Digital communication and internet access may be helpful in staving off loneliness, but being a member of a community also means interacting with people in face to face group activities. Participation in group activities itself has been shown to be essential to enhancing emotional health, regardless of whether or not the activity achieves any concrete goal.⁵ Over the past 15 years many neighborhoods have formed grassroots non-profit organizations to support aging neighbors in their desire to remain independent in their homes and to organize regular social events with friends and neighbors of all ages. The "Village Movement" grew out of the experience of one community in Boston that formed a support network among neighbors to help residents stay independent at home. The Village to Village Network in the US hosts an online database of affiliate nonprofit

organizations, provides digital webinars and trainings both online and at annual events. Many local village groups utilize information technology and social media to organize events and fundraisers, including a new online platform specifically designed to help manage and coordinate these grassroots organizations with online request and notification features.

Volunteers in many communities organize and provide ride-sharing, social and educational activities, and person-to-person assistance for seniors with a focus on intergenerational connections. Intergenerational dialogue is recognized as a key factor in breaking stereotypes and fostering healthy communities. Participation in intergenerational gaming on digital platforms is just one way youth can learn about the community history and recognize the value of older adults. Older generations learn new useful technology skills that can also benefit cognitive function.⁶

Apps are also being developed to facilitate community activities and interactions that can have a great benefit for older adults. Stitch is a companionship app to help adults over 50 find new friends, travel companions, social activity groups or dating partners. A number of services are designed to help caregivers coordinate transportation for family members who do not use smartphones and can no longer drive or enable customers without a smartphone to call a regular phone number to coordinate a ride from on-demand ride services like Uber or Lyft (GoGoGrandparent and ArriveRides are examples). GreatCall, the company with simplified smartphones and medical alert systems for seniors, is piloting a program to connect their clients with Lyft at the press of one button with support from a live operator.

Even when dementia or debilitating chronic conditions require care outside of the home, new connected tools can help long-term care residents maintain a feeling of community and acceptance. RemindMeCare is an interactive planning and communication software program to help advanced dementia or Alzheimer's patients feel more accepted in their environment by facilitating the sharing of information for reminiscence therapy on a standardized interface that can integrate photos, music and personal stories. This information can foster a greater understanding about their life history and help the caregiving team understand patterns of behavior.

The ideal healthy community would be built around services and social support for all members of society, such as the

concept under development by innovators and non-profits at the Center for Digital Innovation in Israel.⁷ Their view is not just for a smart home but smart cities designed for all citizens, regardless of age or ability. Their vision of a multi-layered community integrates senior residents, immediate family, community members, state-organized social services and healthcare systems through a planned environment and multiple connected and digital tools.

The vision of a community where older adults have purpose, responsibilities and a supportive social and healthcare network through all stages of health and longevity is a goal for all communities, not just planned cities of the future. Changes in the way societies structure care and engagement with older adults will take time as we adopt a new perspective on aging. But with the aid of connected digital technologies, many aspects of a healthy community promoting social engagement and intergenerational partnerships can be realized now in our current living environments. The engagement of all generations in the care and emotional health of older adults will be crucial to achieving healthy longevity through the current and upcoming demographic shift.

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