



# Weill Cornell Medicine Neurological Surgery

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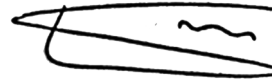
**This Is Your Brain  
with Dr. Phil Stieg**

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**T**hose of us who have had the good fortune to reach age 50 (or 60, or beyond) know that there are some significant changes that take place over time, even in the healthiest of bodies. We need to pay more attention to, and take better care of, our knees, heart, and other body parts as we get older, because they're just not as young as they used to be.

The brain is no exception. As your brain ages the cortex thins, processing speed slows, and signaling pathways weaken. The good news is that functional and cognitive decline are not inevitable. Just as a heart-healthy diet can stave off cardiac problems, a brain-healthy life can help prevent age-related diminishment in cognition, memory, speech, and even happiness. This guide reveals how maintaining social connections can improve your brain's health, with practical advice on what to do—today and every day—to keep your brain working well.



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## Your Guide to a Healthy Social Life

### What Happens When You Have an Active Social Life?

Whether it's lunch with a friend or sex with a partner, being connected to other humans has a positive effect on the brain. Although the physiological mechanism is not entirely understood, studies have shown that those with active social relationships have healthier immune systems and cardiovascular functions, and live longer, than those without them. Part of these benefits may be behavioral—if your friends have healthy habits, you are likely to have those habits as well—but there is more to it than that, and much of it is happening in your brain.

It makes sense that the complexity of personal relationships and social networks require our brains to work hard to maintain them—and a hardworking brain tends to be a healthy one. One large-scale study of elderly women found that those with larger social networks had a significantly smaller risk of dementia than those with smaller circles, suggesting that the more people your brain is connecting with, the greater the cognitive boost. Another study showed that those who described themselves as lonely were more likely to have elevated levels of cortical amyloid, a biomarker for future development of Alzheimer's disease.



### What Happens When You Are Solitary?

In animal studies, the brains of socially isolated animals show lowered amounts of myelin, a protective material that wraps around the axons of neurons. It's clear that isolation isn't good for human brains, either: Social isolation in kids alters brain development by disrupting a protein that helps neuronal cells mature correctly, and many studies have linked solitude and loneliness in adults to increased risk of dementia and early death. The bottom line is that we humans are a social species, and isolation leads to stress and depression that have terrible effects on our brains.

### What to Do

In this age of "virtual relationships," this may be the most difficult prescription of all: Talk to people, make lunch dates, join community groups, and attend local events. Make an ongoing effort to stay connected. Keep in touch with family members and old friends, and make new ones. Seek out social engagements, and resist the urge to cocoon as you age. Getting out in the world is good for your brain!

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