



"When we talk to people, we're listening and communicating, which keeps our brains active and engaged," says Dr. Milstein. (ddp)

How are dinner parties keeping your brain young?

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Unfortunately, there is no cure for Alzheimer's Disease, but there are ways to stave off cognitive decline. The best thing you can do for your brain is keep it active. Having a full social life is one way to do that. Call your family or attend that dinner party because these social interactions will create new pathways in your brain, says leading brain health expert Dr. Marc Milstein. He explains how our social lives impact our brain function and shares helpful tips.

What do we know about brain health?

In 2022, there are 55 million people living with dementia worldwide, according to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), with nearly 10 million new cases being reported each year. In the US alone, more than 6 million people are living with Alzheimer's disease, as noted by the [Alzheimer's Association](#).

While anti-dementia medication and disease-modifying therapies exist, they have limited efficacy, and there is currently no cure. Because of this, prevention is key. Dr. Milstein says the things we're already doing to improve our mental health are often the same things we can do to slow the aging process of our brains.

For instance, loneliness affects both mental and brain health. People who feel lonely have a 40% increased risk of developing dementia, according to a [study that measured loneliness, social isolation, and cognitive ability](#) in a sample of people age 50 and older. "This is a risk factor that we can modify—that we can take action on," Dr. Milstein says. "However, it's important to note that there are many factors that contribute to cognitive decline and to take a holistic approach to prevention," he adds.

How can social connections reduce your risk of cognitive decline?

Social connections drive connections between our brain cells, according to Dr. Milstein. "When we learn new things, we make connections between our brain cells. We want to make more and more connections. When we talk to people, we're listening and communicating, which keeps our brains active and engaged," he says.

“We actually see that people who, over the age of 55, go to dinner parties have a lower risk of dementia,” he continued. “What we believe is happening is that when they are engaged and social, they’re learning new things. This can help with stress management.”

On the other hand, loneliness increases the risk of Alzheimer’s, dementia, depression, and anxiety. “Of course it’s normal to feel lonely from time to time,” says Dr. Milstein. “What we’re concerned about is when it’s too much too often or if it becomes overwhelming.”

Recommendations

Dr. Milstein makes several recommendations for decreasing loneliness and the risk of cognitive decline.

Relationships: “It’s not about how many friends or followers you have,” he says. “It’s about how meaningful your relationships are. The ones that make you feel energized and protected are the beneficial ones, and the ones that make you feel exhausted and drained are the ones you want to minimize. These relationships can be with a pet, co-worker, family member, or friend, as long as we’re getting joy from them.”

“When it comes to pets, there are studies that show that pet owners have increased or improved memory,” he adds. “It doesn’t matter if you’re a dog, cat, bird, or reptile person. We believe that the sense of purpose that comes from taking care of something is the key factor here.”

Social media: Social media is another topic Dr. Milstein receives questions about. He says it’s not all good or all bad. It’s a means for people to interact and if they feel engaged, it can be beneficial. But, social media can also make people feel like they’re missing out. “It’s important to be aware that oftentimes what you see isn’t reality,” he says.

Dr. Milstein suggests people take a self assessment and ask themselves: Does social media make me feel good? Do I feel energized from it? Does it make me happy? Or does it make me feel awful and sad? If it’s the latter, then you want to minimize your use.

Brain exercise: Dr. Milstein also recommends a simple exercise, called “Rose, thorn, bud,” that’s been shown to boost feelings of well-being.

Take a look at your last 24 hours by asking: What was the thorn, or most challenging part, of the last 24 hours? What was the rose, or best part, of the last 24 hours? And, what is the bud, or the thing you’re most looking forward to tomorrow? These simple exercises can help us boost happiness while putting challenges in perspective.

For more on brain health, including how our brains change as we age, common brain health issues, and surprising factors that age the brain, watch the replay of the event [Is your brain aging you with Dr. Marc Milstein](#) and listen to the UBS On-Air podcast [Strategies for a healthier brain with Dr. Marc Milstein](#).

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