

THE FUN SECRET TO LIVING LONGER

Hint: It's your relationships with friends, family, even Fido.

BY AMY PATUREL, MS, MPH



AT 87 YEARS young, Elizabeth Gaylynn Baker is at the top of her game. A social media “granfluencer” thanks to her role on the hit TikTok channel Retirement House, Baker is helping to revolutionize the way we think about aging. She has acted on stages across the country, authored two books, and wrote and directed *We Know Not What We Do*, an award-winning documentary about climate change—all during her 80s.

Whether she’s premiering a new film, lunching with friends, or playing with her three grandchildren, Baker makes a point of connecting with others. She says it’s her relationships and sense of purpose that sustain her. And she’s probably on the right track. Research shows that social connectedness is more important to health and longevity, also known as healthspan, than kicking a 15-cigarette-a-day smoking habit.

On the flip side, studies link poor social support with a 51 percent increased risk of heart disease, a 50 percent increased risk of developing dementia, and a 32 percent increased risk of stroke. And a 2023 study published in the journal *Psychiatry Research* reported that having insufficient social connections boosts a person’s odds of premature death by a whopping 63 percent. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, sounded alarm bells in

2023 with an advisory to address what he calls “an epidemic of loneliness and isolation” in America.

“We have an obligation to make the same investments in addressing social connection that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity, and the addiction crisis,” Murthy wrote. He’s not wrong. Results from the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which followed participants for more than 80 years, show that strong relationships are the greatest predictor of longevity, even more than genetics.

Why Relationships Matter

Humans are wired for connection. It’s as essential to our health and well-being as food, water, and exercise are. According to Carla Perissinotto, MD, who is a geriatrician at UCSF Health in San Francisco, one important way social connections influence physiology is through our stress response.

When we sense that we’re under attack—being chased by a bear, or more likely, worrying about an impending deadline or challenging relationship—our body responds by flooding our system with stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. While that stress response is critical for keeping us safe, over time it can lead to an increased risk of chronic diseases ranging from

dementia to diabetes.

“There’s a growing body of research linking social connectedness to things like lower blood pressure,” says Patrick Runnels, MD, associate chief medical officer of population health for University Hospitals in Cleveland. It turns out that sharing experiences and laughing with good friends produces the feel-good bonding hormone oxytocin, which in turn lowers blood pressure and cortisol levels and encourages cell repair.

Just the presence of a loved one can blunt the body’s response to a stressful experience. One study, published in *PNAS* in 2016, linked higher levels of social connectedness with a reduced risk of inflammation. Since inflammation is implicated in nearly every chronic disease, it makes sense that surrounding yourself with loving, supportive people can improve your health and reduce your vulnerability to disease.

“Research on the Blue Zones, areas that are home to the longest-living people in the world, show that people who live in these regions have strong social connections,” says Hugh Silk, MD, a professor in the family medicine department at UMass Chan Medical School. They linger over meals, exercise together, spend time with their elders, and work to

support the larger community. “Those strong social ties create a sense of purpose and a will to survive,” Silk says.

While a whole-foods diet and regular exercise may partially explain longevity in these regions, research points to the bonding that happens during these activities as a primary driver. “Maybe it isn’t that they drink wine daily, but that they come together and connect over a drink,” suggests Silk. A review of nearly 150 studies including more than 300,000 participants supports his theory, revealing that social support is more critical to overall health than exercise or maintaining a healthy weight.

Which Connections are Most Important?

Is marriage protective against premature death? Does having children lead to a longer life? What about owning a pet? The data on all three is mixed. Perissinotto’s research found that most of the people who reported being lonely were married. “So it’s not like getting married protects against loneliness,” she says.

Still, marriage does seem to offer some degree of protection, particularly for men. In a 2016 study published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, researchers reported that marital status is more important for men’s longevity than women’s, while the quality of the marriage was more critical for women’s survival than men’s. (That was



true for Baker, who in midlife left a marriage that wasn’t serving her.)

Whether you’re coupled or single, gay, straight, or bisexual, social connectedness is what offers protection, Runnels says. “That comes from relationships in which you feel seen, heard, and understood.” That may be one reason why studies show a link between religious affiliation and longevity. “It’s not the spiritual affiliation that produces the effect but the sense of belonging, of being part of an organized community where we can be of service to others,” Runnels says.

Partners, friends, neighbors, and even loyal and loving pets contribute to your emotional, physical, and mental health. A 2015 study published in *Science* reported that gazing into your dog’s eyes produces a boost in oxytocin. “The more kinds of relationships people have and the more supported they feel in their daily lives, the better and longer they live,” Silk says.

That doesn’t mean you should try to drum up friendships with random strangers—or adopt a pet. Instead, Perissinotto recommends thinking about

which connections are most meaningful to you. If you’re an introvert, you probably won’t want to hit Friday-night happy hour with a huge group of coworkers, but you might be interested in finding a local organization that reawakens a dormant hobby or passion. “The idea is to identify people and activities that help you feel less lonely,” she says.

Growing Your Circle

Research confirms that every advanced structure in our brain depends on interaction with other people. But becoming more socially fit isn’t just about nurturing close familial relationships where your sense of purpose is well defined. It’s also about developing a range of friendships and social ties that sustain you in different aspects of your life.

Friendships with people in different age groups are especially important as you get older since they increase the challenge to your brain and reduce the odds you’ll outlive

all your friends. Even from a logistics standpoint, people need help from loved ones spanning multiple generations as they age.

“The benefits of intergenerational ties are bidirectional,” says Perissinotto, who is involved in a pilot study pairing professional students with nursing-home residents. “It’s not just the younger students helping the residents, but the older adults are helping the students, too.”

Unfortunately, society is making it increasingly easy for older and younger people alike to live in isolation—a surefire way to languish and age more quickly. One potential solution: Take advantage of every opportunity to meet and connect with others in ways that boost your sense of purpose and identity. You might decide to take a vegan cooking class, sign up for a group biking trip, or mentor a young professional in your field.

It’s a strategy that Baker has mastered. She keeps herself out in the world, making new friends of all ages, trying new things, and rediscovering herself. Whether she’s being asked to fly across the country to film her TikTok series or help better our planet, Baker’s response is usually an enthusiastic yes.

“Social connectedness is the core of our humanity, our identity, and our sense of purpose,” Runnels says. “When you’re socially connected, health flows from that, because

your body senses its utility. That manifests not just in your body being healthier but also in you feeling compelled to behave in a way that ensures you’ll be around.” Indeed, a 2023 study published in *Psychology and Aging* found that a sense of purpose was associated with more positive social relationships and interactions.

Studies show that other-focused behaviors such as volunteering and expressing gratitude can enhance close bonds, in part by triggering the release of the brain’s bonding-chemical oxytocin. Dating back to the late ’90s, studies reported that elderly people who volunteered were 44 percent less likely to die during the five-year trial period than their less-altruistic counterparts. Other studies found that volunteers have lower levels of inflammatory molecules, including C-reactive protein and interleukin-6. There’s even research to suggest that people who perform random acts of kindness show positive changes in gene expression.

Maybe that’s why Baker is thriving well into her ninth decade. Her focus on preserving the planet and traveling the globe is keeping her engaged and on a mission. She also possesses another trait linked to a long life: a positive outlook.

“Aging is wonderful,” Baker says. “After all, the alternative to aging is death, and who wants that?” ■

HOW STRONG IS YOUR FRIEND NETWORK?

Having a web of friends, neighbors, and family members to spend time with is a major factor in predicting how well, and how long, we live. But when we get busy with life/work/family, it’s easy to let nights out with friends, chats on the sidewalk with neighbors, and check-in calls to your sister fall by the wayside. “You have to make an effort to strengthen those connections, the same way you have to make an effort to go to the gym,” says Perissinotto.

To assess your social fitness, read on and see if you have one or two people who fill your cup in each of the following areas.

Safety and security: Who can you call during a crisis, or when you’re afraid and unsure how to move forward?

Learning and growth: Who encourages you to push your boundaries, try new things, and take risks to achieve your goals?

Emotional intimacy: Who do you confide in? Who knows almost everything there is to know about you and your life experiences?

Shared experiences and a sense of identity: Who has shared many life experiences with you? Who helps strengthen your sense of identity and where you fit in the world?

Romantic intimacy: Who do you relate to sexually and romantically?

Help: Who can you call if you’re in a pinch and need help?

Fun: Who do you call when you want to let your hair down and have a good time? Who makes you laugh and helps you feel connected and relaxed?