

Groups are key to good health

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The quality of a person's social life could have an even greater impact than diet and exercise on their health and well-being. There is growing evidence that being a member of a social group can significantly reduce the risk of conditions like stroke, dementia and even the common cold.

New research by the Universities of Exeter and Queensland, Australia, shows that membership of social groups has a positive impact on health and well-being. The work highlights the importance of belonging to a range of social groups, of hanging onto social groups, and of building new social groups in dealing with life changes such as having a stroke and being diagnosed with dementia.

Writing in *Scientific American Mind*, the researchers from the Universities of Exeter, Queensland and Kansas review a number of previous studies, including many of their own, which identify a link between group membership and physical and mental health. Some more recent studies which support the same conclusion are presented by the Exeter-based researchers at the British Science Festival today (Thursday 10 August).

Commenting on this work, Professor Alex Haslam of the University of Exeter, said: "We are social animals who live and have evolved to live in social groups. Membership of groups, from football teams to book clubs and voluntary societies, gives us a sense of social identity. This is an indispensable part of who we are and what we need to be in order to lead rich and fulfilling lives. For this reason groups are central to mental functioning, health and well-being".

These conclusions are based a number of recent studies which were reviewed in the article and presented at the Science Festival. These included:

- A 2008 study (published in *Neuropsychological Rehabilitation*) of stroke sufferers. This showed that being able to maintain valued group memberships played as important a role in positive recovery as an ability to overcome cognitive difficulties (e.g., problems with memory and language). After their stroke, people's life satisfaction increased by 12% for every group membership that they were able to retain.
- A 2009 study (in press at *Ageing and Society*) of residents entering a new care home. This showed that those who participated as a group in decisions related to the decoration of communal areas used those areas 57% more over the next month and were far happier as a result. In contrast, the use of space by residents in a control group declined by 60%. Moreover, these differences were still apparent three months later.
- Another 2009 study (under review at *Psychology and Aging*) looked at the impact of group interventions on the health and well-being of 73 people residing in care. After a period of six weeks the researchers found that people who took part in a reminiscence group showed a 12% increase in their memory performance, while those who received individual reminiscence or a control intervention showed no change.
- Another 2009 study (in press at the *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology*) also studied nursing home residents and looked at the relationship between their sense of identity and well-being and the severity of their dementia. The

study's key finding was that a strong sense of identity associated with perceived membership of social groups, was a much better predictor of residents' well-being than their level of [dementia](#).

Summarising this and other work in the article, Professor Jolanda Jetten from the University of Queensland commented: "New research shows just how important groups and social identity are to well-being. This is something that people often overlook in the rush to find medical solutions to problems associated with ageing, but it is time that these factors were taken much more seriously".

Dr Catherine Haslam of the University of Exeter, another of the works' co-authors, agrees: "On the basis of what is now a very large body of research we would urge the medical community to recognise the key role that participation in group life can play in protecting our mental and physical health. It's much cheaper than medication, with far fewer side effects, and is also much more enjoyable."

Source: University of Exeter ([news](#) : [web](#))

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