

Friends with cognitive benefits: Mental function improves after certain kinds of socializing

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Talking with other people in a friendly way can make it easier to solve common problems, a new University of Michigan study shows. But conversations that are competitive in tone, rather than cooperative, have no cognitive benefits.

"This study shows that simply talking to other people, the way you do when you're making friends, can provide mental benefits," said psychologist Oscar Ybarra, a researcher at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR).

Ybarra is the lead author of the study, which is forthcoming in the peer-reviewed journal *Social Psychological and [Personality Science](#)*.

For the study, the researchers examined the impact of brief episodes of social contact on one key component of mental activity—executive function. This type of cognitive function includes working memory, self-monitoring, and the ability to suppress external and internal distractions—all of which are essential in solving common life problems.

In previous research, Ybarra has found that social interaction provides a short-term boost to executive function that's comparable in size to playing brain games, such as solving crossword puzzles. In the current series of studies, he and colleagues tested 192 undergraduates to pinpoint which types of social interactions help—and which don't.

They found that engaging in brief (10 minute) conversations in which participants were simply instructed to get to know another person resulted in boosts to their subsequent performance on an array of common cognitive tasks. But when participants engaged in conversations that had a competitive edge, their performance on cognitive tasks showed no improvement.

"We believe that performance boosts come about because some social interactions induce people to try to read others' minds and take their perspectives on things," Ybarra said. "And we also find that when we structure even competitive interactions to have an element of taking the other person's perspective, or trying to put yourself in the other person's shoes, there is a boost in executive functioning as a result."

The studies further showed that the improvement in mental function was limited to tasks assessing executive function. Neither processing speed nor general knowledge were affected by the type of social interaction engaged in by participants.

"Taken together with earlier research, these findings highlight the connection between social intelligence and general intelligence," Ybarra said. "This fits with evolutionary perspectives that examine social pressures on the emergence of intelligence, and research showing a neural overlap between social-cognitive and executive brain functions."

The research also has some practical implications for improving performance on certain kinds of intellectual tasks. If you want to perform your best, having a friendly chat with a colleague before a big presentation or test may be a good strategy. Also, in competitive contexts that occur in some organizations, be aware that you may inadvertently fail to support your cognitive flexibility and focus.

Provided by University of Michigan

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