

## Study finds that neighbors improve well-being in middle and later life

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A new study finds value in the neighbor relationship.

(Medical Xpress)—The old proverb says, "Good fences make good neighbors." But a new Rutgers study has found that having continuously low levels of contact with neighbors, or losing contact with them altogether, is associated with declining levels of psychological well-being in middle and later life.

The School of Social Work study explored whether frequency of contact and perceived neighbor support is important for several measures of [psychological well-being](#). The researchers found that people who reported low quantities of neighbor relationships rated themselves worse over time in terms of aspects of well-being concerning feelings of purpose in life, personal growth, autonomy, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, and positive relations with others.

The study, called, "Continuity and Change in Relationships with Neighbors: Implications for Psychological Well-being in Middle and Later Life," is published in the September issue of *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological and Social Sciences*.

Neighbors might not necessarily prevent us from feeling depressed but they are an important part of the social landscape and contribute to what makes life worth living. From bringing in our mail or making a meal, to providing regular [social interaction](#), [neighbors](#) can play an important role in middle and older age.

"We found that lack of that support contributes to a sense of loss and decreased well-being," says Emily Greenfield, lead researcher and associate professor for Rutgers School of Social Work.

Providing everything from assistance in emergencies, to transportation, to daily social interaction, contact with neighbors was found to provide a boost of well-being. Participants who reported continuously low levels of contact, and participants who experienced losses in contact, were at greater risk for poorer psychological well-being.

A growing number of models for aging services have sought to strengthen neighbor relationships to help older adults remain in their own homes. Despite these initiatives, there has been little research on the implications of neighbor relationships. Greenfield used data from the 1995–2005 National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States to examine associations between continuity and change in neighbor relationships and psychological well-being among adults in middle and later life.

The 10-year data, from over 1,000 adults aged 40-70, showed that continuity in the neighbor relationship was especially important for more developmental aspects of psychological well-being. Unlike previous

studies, which largely have examined neighbor relationships at a single point in time, this study examined a 10-year period during which people's relationships with neighbors might change.

"Smaller, prior studies of older adults within their communities suggest that neighbors' spontaneous interactions can provide a sense of community, structure and purpose, friendship, humor, and an outlet for personal expression. Our study contributes additional empirical support for the importance of community initiatives that help people develop and maintain strong relationships with neighbors," says Greenfield.

Negative and positive feelings also were measured through a series of six items that asked respondents how often during the past 30 days they felt various moods and emotions. The study found that overall relationships with neighbors were not associated with more emotional aspects of psychological well-being.

Greenfield says her findings support an "aging in community" framework, which emphasizes developing supportive relationships among community members not only for the sake of mitigating potential problems in later life but also for promoting optimal functioning and quality of life. Although strong ties with neighbors might not ward off depression, they can yield psychological gains by helping people to feel engaged in adult developmental tasks, such as maintaining a sense of purpose and finding opportunities for [personal growth](#).

**More information:** Emily A. Greenfield and Laurent Reyes, "Continuity and Change in Relationships with Neighbors: Implications for Psychological Well-being in Middle and Later Life," *J Gerontol B*, first published online August 7, 2014 [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbu084](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbu084)

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