

Social groups ward off age-related mental decline

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(Medical Xpress)—People aged over 50 are more agile mentally if they are socially active, a study has found – and the effect is even more pronounced in 80-year-olds.

Analysing data from more than 3000 [study participants](#), University of

Queensland researchers found that people who took part in group [social activities](#) had reduced [mental decline](#) and memory loss than those who did not.

The study, led by Professor Catherine Haslam from UQ's School of Psychology, compared the impact of different types of [social engagement](#) on cognitive health, using data collected by the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing over a four-year period.

"We wanted to discover whether older people benefitted more from interactions that took place in the context of social group activities, compared to those who had interactions with just one person such as a spouse or a friend," Professor Haslam said.

The study recorded participants' engagement in a range of group and one-on-one social activities and their performance on standard tests of memory, fluency and orientation.

It showed that social group activities were more important than one-to-one relationships in slowing cognitive decline, and that the effect became more pronounced with increasing age.

"Fifty-year-olds with above-average [social group](#) ties performed mentally more like 46-year-olds," Professor Haslam said.

"The functional savings were much greater at the older end of the age spectrum, with 80-year-olds performing more like 70-year-olds."

Co-author Dr Tegan Cruwys, from UQ's School of Psychology, said the findings provided important information about the types of social relationships people should invest in to keep themselves mentally active and independent for longer.

"In this context, it is not any social relationship, but active engagement in social groups that makes the most difference," Dr Cruwys said.

"When we consider the overall costs for a yet-to-be-invented drug that could reduce an 80-year-old's cognitive age by a decade, it seems a prudent investment to encourage [older people](#) to stay active in social groups."

A paper on the research is published in *Social Science and Medicine*.

More information: Catherine Haslam, Tegan Cruwys, S. Alexander Haslam, "'The we's have it': Evidence for the distinctive benefits of group engagement in enhancing cognitive health in aging," *Social Science & Medicine*, Volume 120, November 2014, Pages 57-66, ISSN 0277-9536, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.08.037](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.08.037).

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