

Study: Elders who use tech tools feel less lonely, more physically fit

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Forget bingo and shuffleboard. Use of computers and cellphones is linked to higher levels of mental and physical well-being among those over age 80, according to new research.

And these elders - dubbed "the oldest old," a generation typically ignored by the youth-obsessed tech industry - are motivated for the same reasons as digital-savvy millennials: to stay connected.

"Using tech to connect with loved ones was related to higher life satisfaction, lower loneliness and general attainment of meaningful goals - being happy, independent," said researcher Tamara Sims of the Stanford Center on Longevity.

Those who used technology to learn new information were in better physical health, her study also found.

Expansion of elder-focused tech education and support could help those born in an era of Greta Garbo, Model T cars and vacuum tube radio, said Sims.

Americans are living longer than previous generations, and many want to stay at home. With [digital tools](#), they can stay socially engaged - and reach out for help, if they need it.

"I couldn't do without it," said Sal Compagno, 80, of Berkeley, president of the national World War One Historical Association. "It saves me infinite trips to the library."

Every morning, after his second cup of coffee, he answers emails about the war and his organization. Then he does research, which helps him stay abreast of any newly published academic studies. He also uses his PC to plan upcoming seminars - honoring the centennial of America's engagement in the war - seeking conference venues, speakers and nearby hotels.

He searches the web to find images for his World War I lectures to civic groups and schools, and then puts his presentation on a thumb drive for

travel.

Ham radio operator Rudy Bahr, 93, of Mountain View uses a computer program that, in an earthquake or other crisis, can communicate radio messages directly to emergency operation centers, hospitals and other critical facilities. Created by the volunteer-run Southern Peninsula Emergency Communications System, it offers a direct connection that is more reliable than traditional email or cell services.

In an emergency, his damage reports would "show up on the big screen - telling how many casualties, how many roads are out, if there are any building fires," said Bahr, a retired engineer. "It is quite an elaborate operation."

Saratoga's Tsing Bardin, 78, and her husband, 85, use FaceTime with their children and grandchildren in Italy and in New York. "It is free and you can see them as you speak," she said.

Google Calendar is the tool used by 91-year-old Lois Hall, of Palo Alto, to book appointments for one-on-one tech tutoring of other elders at a Computer Learning Center, sponsored by Palo Alto's senior center Avenidas. She also uses computers to create informational fliers.

She cherishes newsy or humorous emails from her son in San Jose and daughter in Cupertino. She also uses email to plan monthly dinners with friends.

She uses Netflix to watch new episodes of the Canadian drama "Heartland." With the holidays approaching, she'll use it for shopping.

"I find everything in the world on Amazon," she effused. "I've loved computers forever."

Sims didn't expect to find much of a correlation between technology and well-being in adults older than 80 because these elders were considered to be the most unfamiliar with these technologies and the least likely to use them.

Conventional wisdom holds that as people age, they perceive time as more limited - and prioritize meaningful interactions with their loved ones rather than learning new information or meeting new people.

"I was going into it a little bit skeptical," according to Sims, whose research is published in the current issue of the *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*. She conducted the study with Andrew Reed, a former Stanford postdoctoral fellow, and Dawn Carr, an assistant professor of sociology at Florida State University.

The research team surveyed 445 people between the ages of 80 and 93, online and over the phone. Elders were asked about their motivation for using cellphones, personal computers, video streaming services and other digital tools.

Contrary to stereotypes, most of the adults over 80 said they used at least one technological device regularly, and doing so was related to higher levels of self-reported physical and mental well-being, reported Sims.

"The key here is that if you get them using these technologies, we could probably see some real benefits to quality of life in very old age," she said, in a prepared statement.

Interviewed elders said that tech tools could be improved to ease their use.

"I wish they would make it easier to comprehend the terms that comprise the Internet," said Compagno, who avoids unnecessary "bugles and

bangles" when using computers. "Computers keep improving, but with improvement comes more language - and you have to keep up with it."

Bahr prefers the efficiency and simplicity of a conventional cellphone over a smartphone, saying the multiple steps are an impediment to use. What's challenging, he said, "are all the steps you have to go through to operate the latest technologies. You can look up all these steps and do it, then two days later, you forget."

Another common frustration, said Hall, is navigation - for instance, learning how to move photos from iPads and iPhones to the computer. When she sets up tutoring sessions, she matches elders with specific questions to volunteers with that type of expertise.

She, too, was initially stumped - but with time, patience and training, improved.

"I struggled along and eventually found classes," she said. "I'm fascinated by computers and wanted to figure it out."

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