

The Memory Practice

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Newsletter

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In this issue, Dr. Michelon tells you about

Social connections and brain fitness

Do you know adults who would enjoy or benefit from brain exercises? Let them know about The Memory Practice.

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- [Brain exercises sent directly at home](#)

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(314) 726-5105

thememorypractice@yahoo.com

Stay socially connected for healthy neurons

Human beings are social animals. It seems intuitive (even for introverts!) that social contact has benefits.

Obviously we need other people to fulfill basic needs such as making sure that our genes outlive us. Maybe less obviously we seem to need other people to maintain adequate levels of mental well being and motivation.

Even less obviously, social contact may help us improve our brain functions...

Social connections, well being and motivation

Mental fitness seems to depend on a large part on being connected with other people.

For instance, in 2007, Gladstone and colleagues studied 218 patients with major depression and found out that low social support, especially coming from the family, was associated with chronic depression.

Baumeister et al. (2005) showed that merely imagining loneliness can negatively affect our behavior: Compared to people who were not told anything, people who were told

that they would likely end up alone in life:

- were less able to make themselves consume a healthy but bad-tasting beverage

- quit faster in trying to solve hard and frustrating puzzles.

Telling people that their future would be full of injuries and the like did not affect their behavior. This shows how much social contact is crucial for human beings!

Social connections and brain health

A new study, published in 2008 by Ybarra and his colleagues, went even further and showed that **socializing can improve brain functions**.

Ybarra et al. randomly assigned participants (aged 18-21) to 3 groups:

- A social group who engaged in a discussion of a social issue for 10mn.

- An intellectual activities group who solved stimulating tasks (crossword puzzles, etc.) for 10mn.

- A control group who watched a 10mn clip of Seinfeld.

After they participated in the discussion or watched the clip or solved the puzzles, the cognitive functioning of all the participants was assessed.

People in the intellectual activities group did better in the cognitive

tasks than people who merely watched a movie.

... this shows that stimulating your neurons is a great way to boost your performance

People in the social group did better in the cognitive tasks than people who merely watched a movie.

.... This is the first time that social interaction is shown to directly CAUSE better cognitive functioning. This is a very exciting result. Remember that participants engaged in discussion for only 10m!

The benefit from social interaction was as great as the benefit from intellectual activities.

Why would social interaction boost brain function? Social interaction involves behaviors that require memory, attention and control. These mental processes are also involved in many cognitive tasks. Thus Ybarra and colleagues propose that social interaction would act as a prime, it would "oil" these processes so that they are ready to be used when a cognitive task is to be solved.

This is a tentative explanation that may require some refinement but the results are here! Social interaction seems to benefit the brain.

Let's talk then! And limit TV time...