

Older adults find greater well-being in smaller social networks, study finds

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Are younger adults who cultivate numerous connections with friends, families and acquaintances through online social networks any happier than older adults who have smaller circles of face-to-face relationships? The answer may be no, according to research published by the American Psychological Association. Quality social relationships boost well-being and may be as important to people under age 45 as they are to those over age 60.

"Stereotypes of aging tend to paint older adults in many cultures as sad and lonely," said Wändi Bruine de Bruin, Ph.D., of the University of Leeds and lead author of the study. "But the research shows that older adults' smaller networks didn't undermine social satisfaction and well-being. In fact, older adults tend to report better well-being than younger adults."

The research was published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

Bruine de Bruin and her co-authors analyzed data from two online surveys conducted by RAND Corp.'s American Life Panel, a nationally

representative survey of adults recruited through a variety of approaches (e.g., random digital dialing and address-based sampling).

Study participants assessed the number of people from different social networks (e.g., friends, family, neighbors) and peripheral others (e.g., coworkers, school or childhood relations, people who provide a service) with whom they had "regular contact in the past six months." Contact included face-to-face, by phone or email or on the internet. Participants also rated feelings of well-being over the prior 30 days.

Researchers found older adults had smaller social networks than younger adults, but the number of close friends was unrelated to age. Younger adults had large social networks consisting of mostly peripheral others, perhaps because online social media networking sites have facilitated the maintenance of increasingly large and impersonal social networks, according to the authors.

Only the reported number of close friends was associated with social satisfaction and well-being across the adult life span. The relationship between the number of close friends and well-being held, even after accounting for the number of family members, neighbors and peripheral others, which was not additionally associated with well-being.

The relationship of the reported number of close friends with greater social satisfaction and well-being did not vary with age, suggesting the importance of close friendships across the life span. This is consistent with observed patterns among Facebook users who reported greater well-being if they perceived more actual friends on their [online social networks](#), according to Bruine de Bruin.

Some policymakers seem to be increasingly interested in improving well-being in [older adults](#) by expanding their social networks to combat loneliness, according to Bruine de Bruin.

"Loneliness has less to do with the number of friends you have, and more to do with how you feel about your friends," she said. "It's often the younger adults who admit to having negative perceptions of their friends. Loneliness occurs in people of all ages. If you feel lonely, it may be more helpful to make a positive connection with a [friend](#) than to try and seek out new people to meet."

More information: Wändi Bruine de Bruin et al, Age differences in reported social networks and well-being., *Psychology and Aging* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/pag0000415](#)

Provided by American Psychological Association

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