



Massachusetts PATRIOT

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The Residents' Advocate-Management's Friend www.mlcra.org

Conversations with Friends Might Boost Your Brainpower

A recent study at Northwestern University shows a notable link between positive relationships and brain health. For the past nine years, the researchers have been studying “SuperAgers” - men and women over 80 whose memories are as good – or even better – than people 20 to 30 years younger. Every couple of years, the group fills out surveys about their lives and gets a battery of neuropsychological tests, brain scans, and a neurological exam, among other tests. When the project was started, it wasn't even clear that the researchers would even be able to identify a group of people to study. But they found thirty-one individuals from around Illinois who are “sharp as a tack” despite their advanced years.

Earlier research led them to look for folks with certain physical differences in their brain structure – they have generally thicker cortexes, a resistance to age-related atrophy and a larger left anterior cingulate (a part of the brain important to attention and working memory). But brain structure is only one factor in their remarkable performance. In this part of the study, 31 “SuperAgers” and 19 cognitively “normal” older adults were compared on a 42-item questionnaire about their psychological well-being. The SuperAgers stood out in one category – the degree to which they reported having satisfying, warm, trusting relationships.

That is in line with other research linking positive relationships with a reduced risk of cognitive decline, mild cognitive impairment, and dementia. The research has not as yet determined how SuperAgers sustain their relationships and whether their experiences might include lessons for others.

But, from a layman's point of view, it may not be doing those crossword puzzles or playing

bridge that keeps your mind active. It may be talking with your friends about almost anything from the weather to the ball game to politics. Try to keep away from repeating the same conversation

over and over again. Try to bring up something new and interesting – even if its just your friend's grandchildren and what they are doing. Seek out new people in your community, reach out to them and help them get adjusted to communal living. Talk to your friends and family on the phone. Try to stay interested in what's happening in your community and in the town where you live. All of that “rubbing up against” people will stimulate your brain – and maybe make you another “SuperAger”. ●

