

Social Whirl May Help Keep the Mind Dancing

By ERIC NAGOURNEY

People hoping to stay sharp as they age often turn to crossword puzzles, math problems and other demanding intellectual pursuits.

But is all that really necessary?

A new set of studies suggests that it may be just part of the solution. Simply talking to people, the researchers say, appears to keep mental skills sharp.

The studies, by psychologists from the University of Michigan and the University of Denver, argue that ordinary day-to-day contact is at least as useful as more formal intellectual activities in preserving mental acuity.

"When people interact with others, basic processes such as working memory, speed of processing and verbal knowledge come into play," the authors wrote. "But social interaction also entails responding to others with our vision, hearing, touch and even smell. It is hard to conceive of a math problem or a novel affecting us in all these ways."

Still, it is not simply a matter of more social contact's leading to a sharper mind. People in better shape mentally are probably more inclined to be social in the first place, the study said. Which is cause and which is effect is not clear, and each may be a bit of both.

"I think in the end it's going to be dynamic," said the lead author, Dr. Oscar Ybarra of the University of Michigan. The study, not yet published, was supported in part by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

Dr. Ybarra said he and his colleagues were responding to a widespread assumption that to keep the brain sharp people needed to engage in intellectual activities. But with many elderly people isolated, the researchers said, it was important not to overlook other factors in mental decline.

The studies were based on earlier research that did not look directly at the association between social activity and cognitive ability, but nevertheless produced data that shed light on the issue. Those works included a government study from the mid-1970's that assess the well-being of 1,834 people ages 62 to 100, a study in 1986 by

the Institute for Social Research that examined the lives of 3,617 Americans ages 24 to 96 and a World Health Organization study from 1991 that looked at aging in four Mideastern countries.

In all the studies, researchers asked participants about social lives and assessed mental skills with simple tests. Dr. Ybarra and his colleagues, Drs. Eugene Burnstein of the University of Michigan and Piotr Winkielman of the University of Denver, took that information and correlated it.

They found a close connection between how much social contact people reported and how well they did when asked to do tasks like count backward by three or recall something.

"The main findings," the authors wrote, "can be summarized

Fighting mental dullness with talk, talk, talk.

as follows: The more people are socially engaged, the better off they are cognitively."

The findings are likely to be accepted intuitively by many people who work with the elderly, but from a scientific viewpoint, the study fails to make its case, said Dr. Jerry Johnson, president of the American Geriatrics Society and chief of geriatrics at the University of Pennsylvania. Much of the problem, Dr. Johnson said, arises from the reliance on published studies.

"The question is so important," he said. "You can't really answer it with archival data."

The researchers said they hoped to conduct follow-up studies with their own subjects.

The researchers did not dismiss the benefits of mental exercises. They cited studies that suggested that people who had mentally stimulating activities reduced their risk of Alzheimer's disease.

But Dr. Winkielman noted that the activities included games like cards and checkers. So the benefits, he argued, "may actually be due to the exercise of the social brain."