Want to live longer? Join a social group

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*Journalist*

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Joining a social group when you retire is just as important to your health as regular exercise, Queensland researchers have suggested.

University of Queensland School of Psychology Dr Niklas Steffens and Dr Tegan Cruwys collaborated with other UQ researchers to track the health of 424 people four years before and six years after they retired, to find out whether belonging to social groups reduced mortality.

The study was conducted in England, however Dr Steffens said the sample was "somewhat similar" to a sample here in Australia and "reasonably representative of society at large", with the average age of each participant 60.5 years at the start of the study.

The study found the more groups an individual belonged to in the first few years after they stopped working, the lower their risk of death.

"For retirees who belonged to two social groups before retirement, their chance of death was two per cent if they maintained the same number of groups for six years afterwards," Dr Steffens said.

"For those who lost membership of one group, the risk of death rose to five per cent, while those who lost membership of both groups had a 12 per cent chance of dying in the six years that followed."

Dr Steffens said findings suggested social groups, such as church and religious groups, charity organisations, social clubs, music groups, political parties, trade unions contributed to a greater sense of agency and purpose.

"We find overall across a variety of different studies that groups tend to be health protective as well as health promoting as people really feel that groups are an important part of who they are, their identity," he said.

"They are also supported by members of the group and give support to other members and those are the things that seem to be important when it comes to health and wellbeing in the long term.

"We feel and experience a sense of agency, a sense of control but also a sense of meaning and purpose, those are particularly important when it comes to health and wellbeing."

The findings suggested benefits from maintaining social group memberships were not affected by wealth, education or pre-retirement health.

"From the variables we accounted for, we could then calculate the chance or likelihood that someone is still alive (in six years) given all those other characteristics such as how many groups they belong to, their gender, their age and so on," Dr Steffens said.

"We really controlled for a range of different factors that one might think might be important when it comes to quality of life and mortality. When we did control for them, it is the case that still we found a relationship between people's activity and engagement in social groups and their quality of life and mortality."

Dr Steffens said he was "surprised" that the findings seemed to suggest belonging to social groups had similar health benefits to regular exercise when it came to reducing the risk of death.

"What we find here is that belonging to groups is as health protective for reducing the risk of death to the same extent as regular exercise, and that is a behaviour that is generally advised and recognised for health and mortality," he said.

These findings were published BMJ Open on Tuesday

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