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Keep your social life strong in later years

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What do both young and old people have in common? Whether we're in kindergarten or retired, we all need connection. It's an essential part of being human, this ability to communicate and build friendships with others.



Yet if you're older, this can sometimes be difficult. Between finishing work, health problems and finances, many things can affect your ability or desire to socialise – but it's a stage of life where it's more important than ever to stay connected.

According to Age Concern New Zealand, it's now understood that social isolation puts you in risk of dementia, heart diseases and issues like depression. While youth experience loneliness more, Age Concern notes that older people are not immune, with a survey revealing that 10.4 per cent of people aged 65-74 and 12.3 per cent of people aged 75+ saying they have felt lonely at least some of the time.

Loneliness is a bit like pain or hunger, it makes us be aware of what we need to do, so being kind to yourself, staying healthy and having a hobby can help. It's all about planning to make those small meaningful steps towards connection. One really helpful thing is picking up your phone and talking to your local Age Concern. It can be hard to have a conversation about loneliness, but we need to start talking about it.

For those still working, another great idea is to plan for retirement by thinking about how you would like your life to look socially and what you could do about it.

Thankfully, in most areas there is no shortage of activities for older people or groups which you can join, with something to suit almost any ability or interest. Councils, information centres, sporting organisations like Sport Taranaki, and a multitude of community organisation like Age Concern are good places to start to find an interest to suit your needs, from sports to crafts to volunteering, and everything in between.

Experts in healthy ageing say it's good to try new things, regardless of age or ability. Many activities often link back to the 'Five Ways of Wellbeing' as defined by the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand: connecting, being active, learning, giving and taking notice. It becomes so much more than whatever the activity is – it's all about the friendships and how you support each other along the way.