Friendships key to a happy old age and a brighter brain

Science increasingly recognises that it isn't all downhill for the brain after your 20s. It continues to form new neural connections and conversations, with meeting people and enjoying new experiences among the most powerful drivers of so-called neuroplas

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Harmful ideas about ageing are leading to "unnecessary suffering" for older people and their families. This was the stark verdict delivered in May by MPs on the Health and Social Care Select Committee, following their in-depth Healthy Ageing inquiry.



The committee's chair, Layla Moran MP, said: "As a growing proportion of society becomes older, we need to have a national conversation and a generational change in attitudes towards ageing. "Assumptions that elderly people are left to fade away quietly lead to harmful behaviours that cause unnecessary suffering for individuals and their families. These retrograde ideas must be upended." The inquiry comes just weeks after a separate report from the Health Foundation found that people in the UK are spending less of their lives in good health than a decade ago – in fact that the popula-

tion's health is "going backwards".
So how can you ensure that the later decades of your life are as healthy and purposeful as the early ones?
The answer could lie in your friendships. Iain Cassidy is CEO of the Third Age Trust, the national charity that supports u3a groups in the UK. The national movement represents more than 400,000 older people who meet regularly through local groups to share their interests, learn new subjects or skills and make friends.
A report from the charity, u3aAnd Me, is due in September. It surveyed 10,000 of its members and revealed almost 80% have improved their social connections since joining a u3a group, and 77% have improved their sense of wellbeing.
"Ageing well is something that will continue to grow in importance as our population gets older," says Iain.
"The Select Committee is absolutely right that ideas about people simply fading away from their communities and society once they get older are outdated and dangerous. "Instead, later life can be a time of being busy, active, curious and feeling socially connected. Our latest report highlights the
'Their social lives are the best they have ever been'
huge impact that meeting with others and learning new skills can have for older people.
"Many of our members tell me that since finishing full-time work their social lives are the best they have ever been. It's a new chapter where, far from fading into the background, they want to feel purposeful and play an active part in their community."
Advanced age in itself is only a cause for decline when a person reaches their 90s, and research has shown that strong, social relationships and regular in-person connection in later life lead to better health. Studies have proved that social isolation is associated with a 29% increased risk of mortality, and loneliness with a 26% increase.
Professor Sir Muir Gray, one of the country's leading experts in ageing well having written multiple books about living a healthy, longer life, is also an honorary clinical researcher at the University of Oxford.
He says: "In medical school I was taught that you lose brain cells starting in your 20s. We now know that's not true. While the brain might not make new cells as we age, it can reorganise itself by forming new neural connections.
"The brain is plastic, it adapts to new situations. Engaging in meaningful conversations, empathising with other people and building relationships are among the most powerful drivers of neuroplasticity. Stimulation comes from learning, meeting new people and getting out and about. "That's why interaction with other human beings keeps you younger, it rewires the brain.
"Physical health is also fostered when people meet socially whether it's to dance, go for a walk or climb a hill, it all counts. Being challenged is better than just being active, for example by becoming a volunteer in a project to help young people or running a social group. Social groups help people teach each other new subjects and activities and have fun while doing it. As more people reach their 70s, 80s and 90s, we must encourage everyone to understand how to live longer, better.
"If we can increase wellbeing, reduce dependency and ward off mental decline and frailty, individuals will feel the benefit, and so will wider society, with less pressure on the NHS and social care."