



### ***Rural Health Information hub***

Nearly 90% of older adults would like to remain in their homes for as long as possible. However, the physical changes brought on by aging — vision and hearing changes, cognitive decline, mobility limitations, and self-care difficulties, among others — can impact older adults' ability to age in place.

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### ***Rural Health Research Institute***

Part of healthy aging in place is remaining active in social, recreational, and physical activities. Being socially isolated and/or lonely for pro-longed periods of time is associated with poor health outcomes, including mortality. Staying socially engaged requires a certain level of social cohesion in one's community. Social cohesion is a sense of belonging and trust within one's community, which is essential for good health.

## What Does Healthy Aging in Place Look Like? Part Three: Social Connectedness

By Lilly Anderson, MPH, DAFH Director, December 2022



Welcome back! We have been examining what it takes to age in place. There are currently over 46 million older adults, and by 2030, one out of every five Americans will be 65 years or older.<sup>1</sup> Aging in place refers to the ability of older adults to remain in their homes and communities as they age, rather than relocating to institutional settings. Aging in place promotes life satisfaction and improved self-esteem. The issue of aging is especially important in rural areas, and according to the Rural Health Information Hub, nearly 90% of rural seniors want to stay in their homes as they age.

The two factors we previously discussed that affect aging in place were housing and income, both strong influences on a person's ability to stay in their home. The third area we want to examine is social connectedness. Social connectedness includes a person's family obligations and interactions, their connections

with their friends and social groups, and their connections to their neighborhood and surrounding environment.<sup>2</sup>

We don't often think of our connection to our environment as social, but it is in every sense of the word. We have meaningful exchanges with our environment on a daily basis and changes or losses are keenly felt. Geographer, Graham Rowels, developed the concept of "place attachment."<sup>3</sup> Place attachment is a sense of physical and social "insidedness" that comes from everyday exchanges that occur over a period of time. Ultimately, these exchanges integrate our lives with an overarching identification with our environment. Which is why leaving an area, or your home, can feel like losing a loved one.

Important to remember is that all types of social connections for seniors are critical and play a vital role in mental, emotional and physical health. The benefits of social connections include, but are not limited to:

- Increased health and overall physical condition
- Decreased blood pressure
- Improved cognitive function
- Maintained purpose of life
- Lower rates of anxiety, depression and PTSD symptoms
- Stronger immune system<sup>4</sup>

When an individual's attachment to place is a significant portion of their social connection network it's easy to see the importance of aging in place.

These are not new concepts to the Grange. The Grange symbols and ceremonies reflect a profound relationship with the environment around us and every Grange meeting includes inquiries about sick and absent members. Grange customs and traditions are yet another expression of "place attachment."

Additionally, when aging in place is supported, the entire community benefits. We often think of diversity only in cultural terms yet intergenerational diversity offers similar rewards and results for those involved. Our older adult's knowledge can help us understand the evolution of an idea across time and bring a greater depth to seeing why we are where we are today.<sup>5</sup>

So that brings us to our now familiar question, what part can the Grange take to support social connectedness? What can we do for our members, and what can we do for our community at large?

Here are a few ideas for increasing social connectedness in society:

- Continue to support internet and broadband connectivity in rural areas
- Offer a variety of activities that have broad appeal across the generations
- Back legislation that funds the design and maintenance of inclusive public spaces
- Prioritize legislation that backs public transportation for rural and suburban areas
- Make social connectedness a community norm
- Honor community assets
- Encourage legislators to allocate resources to assets that strengthen connectivity

In our next issue, we will examine access to health care as a factor that influences aging in place and when we do so, it quickly becomes apparent that many of these factors affect multiple influences. For example, we stress the importance of prioritizing public transportation in this section because an inability to travel to events and social gatherings is a factor that influences social connectedness, but it is an important factor in accessing health care as well. In fact, many factors are influences in multiple categories and act as barriers to healthy aging in place.

Finally, as members of the Grange, we are uniquely positioned to make a huge impact on those in our areas that are struggling with social connections. It's what we do best. Invite others to join us. Be authentic, be genuine, be Grangers.

### References

<sup>1</sup>Rural Hub of Information (RHI). Retrieved from:

<https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/community-living#services>

<sup>2</sup> Older People and Social Connectedness: How Place and Activities Keep People Engaged, yen H, Shim J, Martinez A, Barker J, (2019). Journal of Aging Research. Retrieved from:

<https://downloads.hindawi.com/journals/jar/2012/139523.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Social Connectedness: A Key to Healthy Aging. Retrieved from:

<https://www.healthinaging.org/blog/social-connectedness-a-key-to-healthy-aging/>

<sup>4</sup> Why Social Connection is Important for Seniors, retrieved 11/7/22 from:

<https://www.nursinghomeabusecenter.com/blog/social-connection-seniors/>

<sup>5</sup>The Concept of Aging in Place as Intention, Ahn M, Kang J, Kwon HJ (2020). The Gerontologist, 60(1): 50-59. Retrieved from:

<https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/60/1/50/5272551>