



Karen Doane readies for flight with her multigenerational paragliding crew in Queensland. Read her story on page 80.

Grow your tribe

Forget sudoku or superfoods: if you're an older person with friends of all ages, you're doing great things for your brain.

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Do crosswords. Eat healthily. Move more. We're often told about all the things we need to do to avoid dementia and age well – but one tactic is fast rising to the top: staying socially connected. And better yet, having a multigenerational tribe that you see often.

Here's the thing, though: experts say we tend to curate friendships with people in our own age bracket. It's known as the 'monocultural' social circle, and while it may feel safer and easier to socialise with people who look, think and act like we do, you're better off getting out of your comfort zone, says Dr Suraj Samtani, clinical psychologist at Sunrise Psychology Group and post doctoral research fellow from the Centre for Healthy Brain Ageing (CHeBA) at the University of NSW.

"We gravitate to others of the same age because we feel more confident and have more in common with them," he explains. "But research shows having a variety of

social connections and doing activities with a diverse network of people is quite protective of brain health."

Professor Cassandra Szoek, neurologist and director of the Women's Healthy Ageing Program at Monash University, agrees. "A multigenerational social circle is good, because totally new ideas and concepts challenge the brain," she says. "We also know that when we maintain strong social connections there's less atrophy or brain shrinkage, less inflammation and you have a better immune system."

SOCIAL CIRCLES

Firstly, don't stress if you're only socialising with people your own age – it's still great for your health, says Dr Samtani. "The Harvard Study of Adult Development followed people into older age and found those who delayed the onset of chronic health conditions like heart disease had very good social >

connections compared to others [who weren't so healthy]."

And studies show that socialising can protect against cognitive decline and dementia, adds Professor Szoeki. "There's also strong evidence that the more you do something the better you get at it – anything you don't use, you lose. Social connection uses every part of the brain: it makes you better at recognition, interpreting random information, verbal and visual cue recognition and memory and planning."

So your daily newspaper crossword and sudoku isn't quite cutting the mustard for your brain health as much as phoning a friend? Not even close, says Professor Szoeki. "Crosswords and sudoku just make you better at crosswords and sudoku!"

LEAVE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

If you're keen to gather more friends of different ages, there are lots of great ways to go about it, says Dr Samtani. "Taking classes can be a good way to start conversations with young people – keep it simple, focus on the task you're doing or sharing a story, or asking that person a little bit about themselves," he says.

"Open-ended questions about what they do, what they've been up to, their plans in life all show curiosity and it's the best way to get someone to open up."

Professor Szoeki recommends checking out community groups. "Most communities have them – everything from bridge to tai chi and volunteer gardening. Shared interest clubs, book clubs, volunteering, all are low-pressure ways to build new connections."

BENEFITS OF YOUTH

There are many reasons friendships with younger people are beneficial, says Dr Samtani. "We know curating friendships with people from different generations helps us learn new information, new technologies and leads to lifelong learning. And we know younger people value the wisdom, the practical advice and the perspective that older adults have, which they don't get in their own age group."

And from a clinical perspective, when he sees people with friendships across different generations, there's a real sense of joy. "It can become the highlight of your week – young people learn empathy and older adults feel a sense of purpose and joy and connection, which is so important for our health."

And don't discount the socialising you're doing as a carer of grandkids, either. "We see from our grandparenting research that people are more likely to move when interacting with children," says Professor Szoeki, "and that's also great for the brain." ●

Gender divide

It's not a competition, but men and women do curate friendships differently, and that's something to think about if you're near retirement, says clinical psychologist Dr Suraj Samtani. "Women tend to have friendships they've nurtured and gathered throughout their lives, but male friendships tend to be focused on work colleagues and activities. So when men tend to retire, there can be a big drop-off in friendships."

"That's why it's important to build the social aspect into your retirement planning – mapping out the groups you might want to be involved in, for example. It builds a sense of confidence that you won't be alone once you retire."

"I grew up with my grandparents and great grandparents on both sides; we'd play cards, they'd tell me stories, their life outlook was always useful to me. I found them fascinating."

And now I've had my kids and I have grandkids, I realise I've never thought about the age of the people who become my friends – it's more about who that person is. I have friends in their 20s, 30s and even in their 80s and I nurture them and keep in touch with them all. I've met them through friends, through sporting activities, through being in writers' groups. I even have one young male friend who's 23 and we catch up and keep in touch!

I've found being around younger friends definitely gives me perspective on what's happening in the world; plus I'm learning from them, they learn from me – it makes me feel more youthful in my world view. If we're paragliding together, it doesn't matter how old you are – we sit around the campfire and talk about the day and there's that commonality. And I found my young friends ask me questions all the time, share their fears – and I've got that life



Karen (middle) with her paragliding pals Joshua Brook, 32, Stuart Rafferty, 42 and Emily Peressini, 41.

“I’ve got friends of all ages”

For 65-year-old writer and paragliding pilot Karen Doane, nurturing her diverse friendship group is just as exhilarating as taking flight.

experience to give them another perspective.

My advice to older people who want to make friends from other generations is to look at Facebook groups. Or go to the community bulletin

board, see if there’s an exercise group you can join. Men’s Sheds are great and they attract men of all ages. People are probably as nervous as you are about those initial conversations but once

you do it, those friendships will come, and you never know what might come of it, or who they know!

I think it is essential that we stay in touch to keep those communication channels open, because

it’s too easy when you get older to doom scroll or watch telly or get stuck in a routine. For me, it’s essential to stay connected and see what else is out there, because I’m still learning and growing.”