

DIGITAL SENIORS

A new survey of seniors highlights the benefits of electronic connections with family and friends.

A RECENT SURVEY SHOWS THAT A SMALL PERCENTAGE OF SENIORS AGE 80 AND OLDER WHO USE SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY ARE HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER THAN THOSE WHO DO NOT.

That survey, titled “Rewiring Aging,” was conducted by Kelton, a leading global research firm in collaboration with The Stanford Center on Longevity, which provided guidance on the survey design and analysis of results. It’s the first in-depth study of how online social networks and other technology-based activities can improve quality of life among America’s oldest and fastest-growing demographic segment.

The survey was underwritten by Brookdale, the nation’s largest provider of senior living solutions, operating approximately 1,135 communities in 47 states.

The summary that follows highlights the most significant findings revealed in the “Rewiring Aging” study.

OUR ELDEST SENIORS DON’T WANT TO BE LEFT OUT

Among those surveyed, 58% don’t want to be excluded from the digital world. They want to join in, believing that technology could enhance and increase their communication with loved ones. They yearn for an electronic presence in the lives of their children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews and old friends.

That 58% majority represents a large number of seniors. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are approximately nine million people age 80-plus in the United States.



The United Nations reports that in most countries, the age 80 and older population is growing more rapidly than any other segment. Globally, that category is increasing twice as fast as the broader 60-plus demographic.

Significantly, only 5% of survey respondents said they were completely opposed to using new technology.

SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY IS GOOD FOR YOU

Seniors who interact with friends and family through social technology report they enjoy greater life satisfaction and better health than those who do not make those electronic connections.

According to Brookdale’s Chief Medical Officer, Kevin O’Neil, MD, “Human connection is crucial for people at all ages, but especially so for seniors.” Dr. O’Neil, a board-certified internist and geriatrician, elaborated. “Loneliness in this age group is associated with shorter life spans, chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, depression and even dementia.”

The negative impact of isolation on seniors who are unable to leave their homes and go out into the world due to physical or mental conditions is already well-known. Now, the “Rewiring Aging” survey reveals similar suffering among those who are “virtual shut-ins.”

Seniors age 80-plus who do not use technology to link with the outside world report lower overall life satisfaction, poorer physical health and greater loneliness than their digitally connected peers.



MOST SENIORS AREN'T USING SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY

Although a majority of seniors want electronic connections with loved ones, very few in the 80-plus age bracket actually use social technology. Only one-third of the age 80 and older demographic segment use a personal computer at least once a month. Fewer than one in five utilizes text messaging.

Among the seniors surveyed, 27% use no technological devices, apps or programs whatsoever.

MOST SENIORS NEED TECHNOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE

A primary reason seniors choose to avoid technology is the perceived difficulty of using it. Nearly half of survey respondents said it would take too long to learn and keep pace with digital technology.

A third of those surveyed said they would like to be able to text or videochat with family and friends. More than 25% would be interested in taking group classes to learn how.

“That’s why engaging seniors with others is a focus of our communities. Helping those in their 80s and above connect through technology is an opportunity to enhance their well-being even further,” said Dr. O’Neil.



“This study puts data to what we have been seeing on a daily basis across our organization as we help our residents connect through technology,” said Sara Terry, Brookdale’s Vice President of Resident and Family Engagement.

Brookdale associates help residents learn to use Skype and social networks on the senior-friendly InTouch computer systems designed for ease of use in their communities. The company is also developing an iPad mentor program.

“We find that most are very receptive and that it quickly becomes an important part of their lives. It brings wonderful emotional benefits that complement the focus on relationships and connection that is central to our mission,” Sara added.

SENIORS CAN PRESERVE THEIR PRESENCE IN THE LIVES OF LOVED ONES

Silicon chips, flash drives, LEDs, circuit boards, and millions of software code bytes are components of technology that may seem cold and robotic.

However, these digital tools can foster connections that are warm and human.

For elders far and near, electronics can deliver special moments from the lives of their loved ones such as a video message from a grandson at his overseas military base, photos of a niece’s new house, sights and sounds of a baby granddaughter’s first coos, a live view of a grandson’s performance in a school play, or a text chat with a long-lost friend from decades past. Invisible Wi-Fi signals and miles of fiber optic cable can carry our love far beyond the horizon and tie our hearts to those we hold dear.

