

Just Keep Talking

3 Simple Steps to Getting and Staying Connected at Any Age



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Hello, hello, hello.



That's the way I opened my radio show every Sunday morning for almost 20 years. I found that just saying, "Hello" is enough to get a conversation started. So I was thrilled when asked to write an e-book on communication for older adults.

I'm an older adult myself, almost 65, in fact. I started out as an attorney, but then began to write books about law and personal finance. I was "discovered" by a talent agent while I was on TV promoting my book. That started a new career for me on radio and TV. My first show was IRS Tax Beat on FNN, and a famous brand of headache medicine was my first sponsor (you can't make this stuff up!).

After writing 14 books, being on Oprah and Regis many times, I got to meet some really great talkers. Some of my favorites are talk show host Barry Farber, the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser. I soon realized how much I loved to get into a really good conversation. How about you?

Through the material in this little book you'll discover that socializing adds years to your life, and life to your years. It's dangerous (and boring) to have too little to do, and too few people to talk with.

So, read on and enjoy the journey of becoming and staying a talker.

Adriane G. Berg
CEO, Generation Bold

It's Time to Just Keep Talking

Are you concerned that your social circle will get smaller as you age? What will happen to your relationships as family and friends move, or you relocate? Do you sometimes feel that you and your children and grandchildren speak different languages and are getting farther apart rather than closer? It's no surprise that you feel this way. Many of us do.

“A lot of people around me are aging, and some are not doing so well... Some who never developed social skills are having the hardest time and those are the ones we need to watch out for.”

- **Barbara Dane, 85-year-old jazz singer**

Fortunately, there's good news. Channels of communication for older adults are opening across the generations and you can be part of the Just Keep Talking campaign to keep us all connected. As our longevity increases we have the pleasure of knowing our grandchildren perhaps until they become middle aged. The average 60-year-old has at least one living parent, who is usually in his or her 80s. So within families, intergenerational conversations are now more regular.

In 1979 Dr. Robert Butler won the Pulitzer Prize for his book “Why Survive? Growing Old in America,” shining a spotlight on the face of ageism and opening up the dialogue for successful aging. Today we are talking across the generations.



There are Compelling Reasons to Just Keep Talking The Survival Advantage

Reason 1: You will live longer

There's a growing body of research recognizing the importance of **socialization** and **productive activity** as essential features of successful aging. Conversely, social isolation shortens life spans and decreases our well-being.

Mortality rates rise sharply with low levels of connection and high isolation. **Death is more than twice as likely** for the isolated as compared to people that have good social relationships. The famous “**survival advantage**” study examined the association between productivity, socialization and physical activity over a 13-year span.

The study revealed that social and productive activities conferred a survival advantage equivalent to exercise or other physical activity. The researchers concluded that a wide range of mechanisms of physiological and psychosocial factors impact our health. Isolation is as much a health risk as smoking and lack of activity.

Only a third of the way we age and the number of years we are apt to live is dictated by our **genetics**. And this genetic factor decreases after we reach age 65. The other two-thirds is dictated by our lifestyles. Healthy relationships and connectivity are necessary parts of our personal program for successful aging.

Why this communication surge for older adults?

- We are now aware that loneliness is a health hazard.
- Conversely, healthy communication cuts down on disability and extends life expectancy.
- Scientific studies reveal that communication is essential to long life and good health.
- Ten thousand boomers are turning 60 everyday. They are a group used to being heard.



For your sake, recognize the place of friends, family, sense of purpose, self-esteem and conversation in our overall well-being and longevity.

Reason 2: You will stay physically healthier

Studies show that communication and engagement not only increases our years, but decreases our disability rates.

With modern medicine and new health protocols, living longer is less of a challenge than staying well and productive. **HALE**, Health Adjusted Life Expectancy is the new measure of successful aging, not just our years on this planet.

“Basic social and lifestyle factors might have the largest long-term impact on disability rates.”

- Berkman and Syme, “Social Relationships and Health” (1979)



Most of us agree that a great conversation with a friend or family member, or even a stranger you met briefly, makes you feel good. But studies show that there is more to it than just our feelings.

Social connectivity reduces the detrimental effects of stress and enhances both the **cellular** and **immune** systems. Studies have gone as far as to suggest that for patients with chronic conditions like arthritis, social activity promotes well-being as effectively as physical activity.

Reason 3: You will stay more mentally fit

Our brain will not stay healthy without constant interaction. The brain is a social organ and actually changes with others. The **limbic system** of our brains, which is the seat of our emotional learning, is not fully connected when we're born. It forms through our relationships. The way we bond with others is not just a social event, but a biological event as well, and can even affect our **hormonal systems**.

Our biology, cognition, and social interaction are all connected. When we have a social experience, the neurons in our brain fire, in turn strengthening our neural networks. These are the networks that keep us mentally sharp. **One study from the Harvard School of Public Health** found that people with no social ties were twice as likely to have cognitive decline as those with only five or six social ties.



Good conversations make for better brains

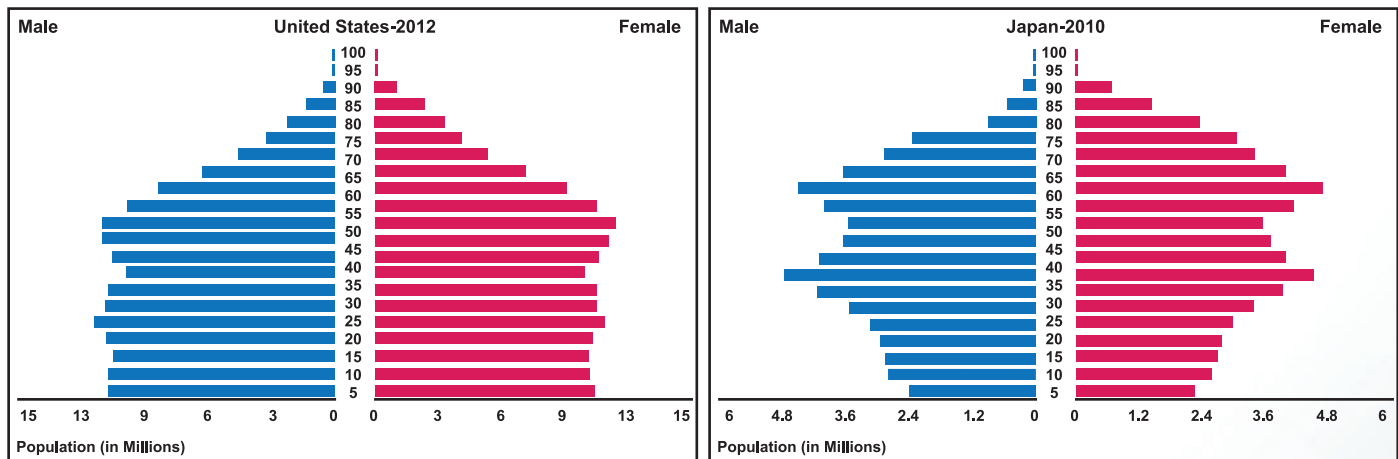
In the past 20 years, **neuroscientists** have discovered that while our earliest relationships build the brain structures we use for relating to others, we can actually develop better **emotional** and **social intelligence** by communicating more. Much like exercising a muscle, we can improve our neural circuitry by the nature and the frequency of our relationships and how we communicate in later life.

“It’s fascinating to learn what’s happening in our brains as we feel accepted or rejected by people closest to us or important to us... While we hope it’s love that makes the world go round, it IS human beings relating to one another that make the world go around...”

- **Linda Graham, Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT)**

Countries that socially include, even revere, their elderly have a healthier, longer-lived population. Different countries show different levels of disability as their populations age. For example, Americans spend 72 percent of their post-65 years free of disability. The Japanese spend 91 percent of their time past the age of 65 with no disability. Japanese women have a life expectancy of only four months longer than American females, but live with a disability for only 1.8 years compared to U.S. women who suffer from disability for 5.5 years.

Communication and engagement improve our [cognitive ability](#).



*Source- US Census Bureau 2010

Just Keep Talking

Fill Your Social Calendar
in 3 Easy Steps

3 Steps to Just Keep Talking

Now that you understand the benefits of socializing, it is time to make new friends and connect with old ones.

Step 1: Expand your social circle starting today

Make a personal commitment to connect with a friend, family member or make a new acquaintance every day.

“Be the change you want to see in the world”

- Gandhi

Answer these questions:

- How many opportunities do you have in an average day to talk face to face?
- Who can you call just to chat?
- What time of day would you like to relax over a good conversation?
- Is anything stopping you from connecting?
- Is there someone in particular you would like to speak with or meet?

Let these questions generate an internal conversation to determine if you are taking advantage of all the social possibilities out there and if not why not. The more connections you make, the more you become an ambassador for breaking down barriers between and across the generations. It's not always easy; fortunately there are stellar resources to help you. Just like a good meal, conversation should have variety. Here are just a couple of opportunities to expand your social circle and bring a rich fabric of multi-dimensional conversations into your life:

Expand Your Circle



Resources

Lifelong Learning

[Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#)

Volunteering

[Senior Corps](#)
[World Volunteer Web](#)
[VolunteerMatch](#)
[RSVP](#)

Support Groups

[Alzheimer's' Association](#)
[National Parkinson Association](#)
[Friendly Visitors \(Meals on Wheels\)](#)
[Care Givers](#)
[Care for the Caregiver](#)

Fitness

[Gyms](#)
[Silver Sneakers](#)
[International Council of Active Aging](#)

Travel

[Ageless Traveler](#)
[Road Scholar](#)
[Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality](#)

Clubs and Societies

[American Horticulture Society](#)
[American Historical Association](#)
[Red Hat Society](#)
[Elks Club, Kiwanis Club, Rotary Club and Lions Club](#)
[Elders Share the Arts](#)
[Readers Circle](#)

Step 2: Say it better – It's not too late to become a master communicator

Many people of all ages have trouble talking. If you have moved to a new community to downsize or to enjoy congregate living, it is especially important that you make new friends. It's like high school all over again. But you do have more emotional intelligence.

The famous interviewer and journalist Barbara Walters recognized this in her book, "How to Talk with Practically Anybody About Practically Anything." She and other expert communicators agree that talking is not only about the words you use, but how you say them. People remember your tone more than your speech. Nothing sounds nicer to a person than hearing his or her own name. Call people by their names in the first sentence you utter to them. Focus on who they are, and you will master the art of communication. And smile when you talk!

Milton Gralla, philanthropist, business leader and journalist teaches the greatest social lesson, ever:

Shine the spotlight on the other guy!

If you're finding it difficult to strike up a conversation with new people, or even with old friends or family members try these hints and tips:

- Relax; nothing you say will ruin anything.
- Have more communication rather than less, even if you're not quite comfortable. Practice makes perfect.
- Walk a mile in his or her shoes, with compassion for the person with whom you are speaking.
- Listening more and talking less actually makes you a better communicator.
- Stay present and really listen to what they're saying.

- Don't finish sentences; give the other guy a chance to talk.
- Pay attention to tone and facial expressions.

Why is it so hard to talk to grown children and close family?

Sometimes it's harder to talk to family, spouses and those you love than to friends and acquaintances. Why is this? Usually it's because we have a communication style that we have used over so many years that people close to us hear our style, not our words!

Even a communication expert has a difficult time talking to her mother:

“Like children whose academic performance rises to match a teacher's expectations, my mother's mind seems to rise to my expectation of it. As I tell her that she is still sharp as a tack, she actually improves. This really works. Rather than mourn her losses, I try to help her focus on what she still has.”

- Catherine Wakelin, Talking to Seniors – A New Challenge

Communication experts identify four types of talking styles that also reflect parts of our personality - not always the best parts. Do you see yourself or others you know using the following “types” of communication? How does it impact those around you?

- Passive communicators: They are self-effacing and like to please others.
- Aggressive communicators: They act as if only their needs matter and dominate the conversation.
- Passive aggressive communicators: They keep resentfully silent or express themselves in manipulative ways instead of speaking their mind.
- Assertive communicators: They recognize everyone's needs as well as their own and engage in honest neutral language. Assertive communication is the gold standard of interaction between people. But, we know it is easier said than done.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we all display some or all of these communication characteristics, and we may be turning off the ones we love the most. We are left wondering and often hurt by their failure to call us or visit.

Can you make a change after all these years, now that you understand the vital importance of good connectivity to your health and longevity?

Sure you can. If you have had a difficult time talking to your grown children, spouse or friend, take a deep breath and:

- First, think about how you communicate. Awareness of how you talk to loved ones is the first step to turning the relationship around.
- Second, before you speak ask yourself these questions:
 - Is what I am about to say kind?
 - Is what I am about to say truthful?
 - Is what I am about to say helpful?

To the extent that what you say to anyone anywhere is kind, truthful and helpful you will be a magnet for friends and an example across the generations.

- Third, have plenty to talk about other than your aches and pains. Don't limit your conversations. If you are interested in something, your listener will be, too.

What is there to say?

Many older adults think they have nothing to talk about. What's worse, they think no one is interested. It's a terrible feeling and leads to lowered self-esteem. But perceptions are changing because of an important social science breakthrough by developmental psychologist [Dr. Erik Erikson](#). Dr. Erikson chronicled [the stages of human development](#) from birth to older age. When he and his wife reached their 90's he found a new stage, which he called [Gerotranscendence](#). It means that we look back on our lives to seek meaning. We engage in life review. We have a lot to say about the meaning of life learned through our past experiences. Wow. That makes us pretty interesting.

Engaging others in your life review can be fun for all. [Golden Cuisine](#), a meal company for seniors, provides suggestions for a [culinary life review](#), where you share recipes and tell stories around your most memorable meals. [Life Bio](#) offers materials and instructions for chronicling your life with videos and photos as well as stories.

If you are a collector or a hobbyist, share your wisdom with young people who are just beginning to enter the world that fascinates you. They love listening to someone who has lived through important events or discoveries relevant to their interests in art, music, science or math.

And you can also talk about money! [The MetLife Report on American Grandparents](#) highlighted the increasing financial interactions between the generations. Books like “[The Totally Awesome Money Book for Kids and Their Families](#),” include games and discussions that grandparents can share with younger grandkids and teenagers.

Don't let hearing loss stop you from talking or listening

As we age our hearing diminishes. Yet, 50 percent of all hearing loss goes undiagnosed. Hearing loss may make you harder to understand or what's worse, make you seem to be in cognitive decline. If you do have hearing loss and are serious about engaging in great conversations, here are a few things you can do:

- Talk with your good ear towards the speaker.
- Repeat what he or she said to make sure you heard correctly. Tell the person you are doing this. He or she will be happy you want to get it right.
- Speak clearly and sit at eye level; we also understand with our eyes.
- Don't shout, and ask them not to shout.
- Talk on the phone and speak in a proper tone

Above all, acknowledge your hearing loss to yourself; and get checked out by a professional. Loss of self-esteem, hiding, anger, frustration and fatigue all come with a refusal to accept hearing loss. Medicare does not cover hearing aids. But, there is help out there. Visit [Benefits Checkup](#) to learn about local programs for free or reduced cost devices. [Hearing Loss Association of America](#); [Better Hearing Institute](#), all provide guidance.

Consider using assistive devices. VTech enhances its CareLine™ phone system with audio technology, Audio Assist® that temporarily increases volume for easier hearing on calls.



A word to caregivers and family and friends of older adults

If you are having difficulty sustaining a conversation with older people, especially loved ones with some frailty or cognitive decline, don't despair. Life review is one great way to start. Look at photos, talk and listen to music. The poetic and artistic part of the brain is often freer in older age. Bring craft supplies and start projects. It takes a little work and some patience but is ALWAYS worth it. For elders that are aggressive or even abusive from time to time, appreciate that the older brain loses some filters and what elders say can hurt. Chalk it up to life stage. For quiet elders, just keep talking; they are listening.

“Social media is a remarkable tool for keeping in touch, especially for seniors who keep in touch with kids, grandkids, and sometimes even great grandkids, but it's more than just family.

Seniors are finding their college roommates, best friends from “the block” and elementary school crushes. The social networks enable us to view videos, read blog posts, share pictures and have conversations with people who we thought we'd never see again. Grandparents are friends with college-aged grandkids and keeping up with their accomplishments.

To say social media has revolutionized the way families connect is an understatement.”

- Deb Ng, “11 Reasons Why Seniors Should Care About Social Media”

Help the Older Adult in Your Life [Get Wired](#)

You mean grandma texts?!

If you are an older adult, you have noticed that the younger generation uses social media to connect. There is a lot of criticism around too much texting and online communication and how it is replacing good old-fashioned conversation. This is all the more reason that us older adults should be a beacon of the joys of face-to-face communication, more telephone calls and less electronic outreach. But, we will get nowhere if we take a hard line and refuse to let texting, video calling, and social media like Facebook, and Twitter into our lives. Senior friendly [computer technology and training](#) has opened our world to online communication, so be willing to get wired!

Step 3: Design your “stay connected calendar”

Take a look at your calendar. Think of it as a large blank canvas on which you are about to paint a beautiful picture of the year to come. If you don't have one, consider getting an expanding folder; you'll need it.



You can get free calendars from any pharmacy or insurance agent or your bank.

When you write a social event into your calendar you make it real, you give it time and place, and give yourself motivation to keep the appointment. Doctors say that patients going through an operation do much better if they have full calendars and feel compelled to get well and get on with their busy lives.

Does your calendar look empty? Don't worry. What you focus on expands.

Start with the basics. Fill in:

- Holidays, birthdays and anniversaries
- Enter club dates
- Get monthly gym and senior center calendars
- Get ticket information
- Plan a vacation

It looks much fuller now, doesn't it?

Just Keep Talking

Think through the next 12 months and make a written note of one way to expand your circle each month. For example:

- January-join a gym
- February-volunteer
- March-search for a relative
- April-spring clean with a friend
- May-take a cooking class
- June-start the community garden
- July-write a poem
- August-get your hearing checked
- September-Take a class
- October-fundraise for a cause that is important to you
- November-reminisce with far away friends and family as well as nearby ones on Thanksgiving
- December-be the leader this holiday season, connect the family by phone, in person and by letter
- Happy New Year-throw a party

Still having trouble connecting? Here a few more great ways:

- Your local senior center is like a “connection store”
- Apply for the local Friendly Visitors Program

Please don't hesitate to call your local [Department for the Aging](#) and sign up for a visitors program. Volunteers are waiting for your wisdom. Don't deprive them.



Be part of the Living Legacy Project, launched in September 2012. The Living Legacy Project is a global initiative to teach seniors how to scan, archive, and give voice to their vintage photos to keep history alive. The International Association of StoryKeepers (I-ASK) was formed to train and support a network of certified legacy advisors.

You can read the project's free online [archive](#). The project provides trained advisors to systematically teach and assist seniors to scan their photos and record their oral narratives describing the people and events only they could know. Then the information is archived on a secure, online research library, and the talking photoscan can be shared in a modern format to be accessed all over the world.

“I volunteered for The Friendly Visitor Program in my county and met every week with a lively 90 year old veteran who regaled me with his poetry and with World War II stories. I helped him enter his poems in a contest for poets over the age of 72.”

- Adriane Berg, Advocate for Successful Aging

“The vast majority of human history will go undocumented, thrown into dumpsters as thousands of seniors pass away each day... Without a systematic approach...there will be millions of family heroes going unnoticed at a time when our children need it most.”

- Tom Cormier and Dennis Stack, co-founders of the Living Legacy Project

Conclusion Or “You can say that again!”

There are lots of books that offer advice to younger people on how to talk to older people. But, very few ask us elders to speak up for ourselves in our own ways.

We have a lot to say, and we can be influential in government, in the market place, and in our families. But as we get older, we begin to doubt if anyone wants to converse with us. We may question whether we are still relevant to the world in general and to those we love in particular.

Well, we are. We must acknowledge our contributions and not let our friendships get fewer or our conversations more narrow in topic. Just like a muscle where we “use it or lose it,” so too, with conversations and relationships. The more we work on meeting new people, making new friends and keeping old ones, the more we stay interesting, and the more people we attract. It’s all connected.

So stay happy, healthy, live longer and win friends. How? Well, just keep talking!

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