

The Reengage logo consists of the word "Reengage" in a white, sans-serif font, positioned inside a red speech bubble shape that points downwards and to the right. The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of an elderly woman with short, wavy white hair. She is wearing a purple quilted jacket and a pink patterned scarf. She has a joyful expression, with her mouth wide open in a laugh or smile, and her eyes are squinted. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green foliage.

Reengage

September 2024

Forget your troubles

Insight summary: our older people on getting happy

Happiness can promote wellbeing and better health outcomes as we age. Older people in Re-engage services find joy in social connections, nature, and hobbies - and say positive mindset is key

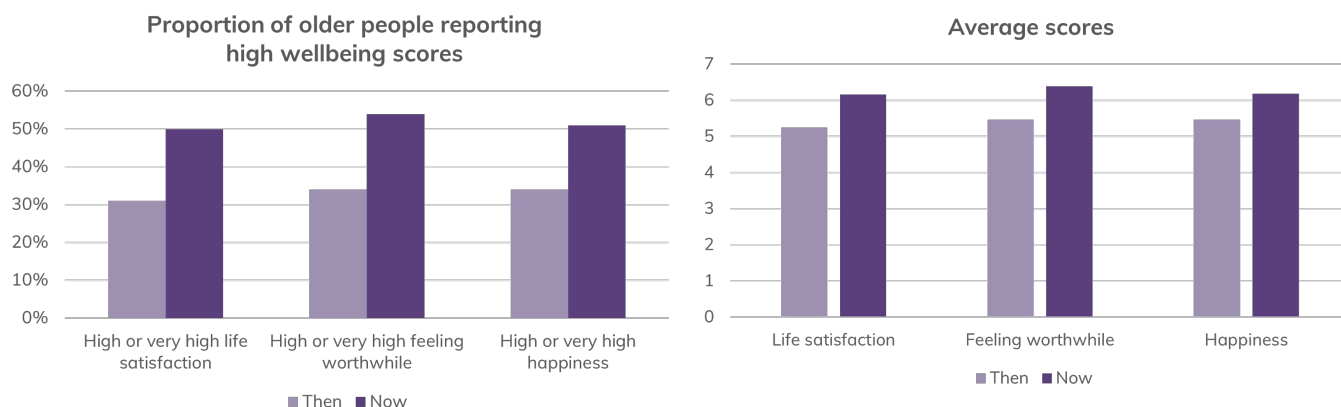


Our wellbeing data

Almost three-quarters of older people who enjoyed Re-engage services in the year to April 2024 said they felt happier as a result of joining us (73%); 88% say we've given them something to look forward to.

Our annual survey also asks people to rate their wellbeing by describing the extent to which they feel satisfied with life, the extent to which they feel the things they do day-to-day are worthwhile, and how happy they felt the day before by giving a score from 0 to 10.

These are questions we also ask people when they join our services; comparing the two datasets, we can see that the proportions of our older people who rate these measures with high or very high scores (i.e. seven to 10) is around 50% higher for each measure. The average score given is also higher.



Introduction



Re-engage is a charity that is positive about older age and committed to fighting loneliness so that people can have social lives and friendship groups however old they are.

We inspire and enable meaningful connections and shared experiences within communities across the UK for people 75 and over facing loneliness and social isolation. Our volunteers work together to create better communities and help to enrich the lives of our members by giving them something to look forward to. Older people who may have felt very alone now feel valued as individuals, continue to form friendships, and have groups that give support.

We regularly ask our older people about how they are feeling, including when they join us and in our annual surveys; as well as questions about feelings of loneliness, we ask about wellbeing and any changes to how people feel as a result of engaging with our services.

We are always pleased to see signs of positive change in reported wellbeing (see facing page).

There is growing awareness of the health implications of loneliness¹ and a strong body of research to show that happiness is associated with better health and lower mortality, even when data are adjusted for demographics and baseline health².

Happiness can be volatile in the short term and fluctuate in the longer term, but it has been described as being malleable: it is possible to improve one's happiness through activities that are enjoyable and of personal value³. Similarly, our wellbeing can be negatively impacted if we have to give up activities we enjoy, for example if we develop long-term conditions or find ourselves isolated⁴.

We asked older people to tell us about the things in their lives that bring them joy and happiness – no matter how small – and to share their tips for others. In this insight summary we share key themes in their responses: the pleasure of connecting with others, finding joy in nature and happiness in hobbies.

“Joy potentiates action and is energising. Joy provides the motivational resources to act, to intervene, to improve. Joy is also often contagious, it involves transference as we share and spread joy.”⁵

Our older people shared a range of stories and show in their suggestions a keen awareness of the adversities that may be faced by their peers, adjusting their own experiences to make them more accessible to others - for instance, those who may struggle to leave the house.

Although they have faced or are currently facing loneliness and/or social isolation, more than a quarter of our respondents encouraged others to adopt a positive attitude and derive pleasure from even the smallest or seemingly everyday things. Research has shown that older people are adept at regulating their emotional health by focusing on positive things and more easily filtering out negatives than younger people⁶.

Social connections as a source of joy

Three-quarters of the older people who responded to our questions mentioned socialising (74%); around a third mentioned **spending time with family** (34%), some focusing particularly on **grandchildren**, and one third of people mentioned **keeping in touch with friends** (32%).

Studies have commonly found that social connections are an important source of joy for older people: sharing experiences helps to create a sense of belonging as well as offering opportunities to reminisce and reflect on the past⁴. Psychologists suggest that using our imagination - e.g. to daydream or to remember - allows us to (re-) experience past and future joys in the present⁵. Several older people told us that looking through old photos to recall fond memories brought them joy, and some referred to **sharing photos and stories** with others at monthly Re-engage tea parties.

A noticeable minority of older people talked about finding joy in **simply mixing with other people** in any way, whether or not they were friends (16%); interactions didn't have to be long or have emotional depth in order to be meaningful.

When asked what tips they'd offer other older people looking for moments of joy, almost half of our respondents suggested talking to people (43%), including getting out of the house to create opportunities to 'bump into' others, even if they were strangers.



"Love seeing my children and grandchildren - they bring me a smile"

"Family photo albums are so uplifting; makes me happy looking at weddings and family occasions. Funny, too"

TIPS FOR CONNECTING

"Smile and say 'Hello' to people you see, they could be a friend."

"Force yourself to get out of the house and engage with people in as many ways as possible."

"Using the bus is good for a chat."

"My tip is not to be afraid of talking to strangers. That may be the only communication they have all day. Hopefully it may cheer them up a little. It's never too late to make new friends as I have through Re-engage."

Previous research has shown that even simple, passing interactions such as saying hello to a bus driver or nodding at a neighbour can boost wellbeing⁷, and while younger people tend to need to spend a lot of time socialising in order to feel happier, for older people smaller amounts of time make a positive difference⁸.

A few of our older people mentioned **volunteering and community work** being a source of happiness and suggested it to others as a way to connect with people and enhance wellbeing.

"Helping others makes you feel good, too"



As a couple of older people pointed out, **accepting help** is also important. "I've learnt through my husband's death to reach out to people. Don't just carry on. I've even gone out and just sat and people-watched, and usually always end up talking to someone. Other people are also lonely. If people offer help, take it."

Roughly one in 10 of our respondents mentioned going to **church**, finding joy in their faith or in the social aspects of practicing their faith. Attending meetings of any kind of **community organisation** affords an opportunity to meet and spend time with people.

"I go to church on Sunday morning and there is socialising after the service with a tea or coffee"

Around one in five older people mentioned the contact they have with people through Re-engage, whether that was attending a tea party, an activity group, or hearing from their call companion.

Several of our older people talked about the joy of **receiving letters and phone calls** – especially when they were unexpected. One person highlighted the delight of hearing "the sound of post coming through the letterbox."

"My lovely call companion brings me joy. She shares her very interesting life both past and present with me, it's like an open window into an outside world"



"Just having a phone call out of the blue makes you feel special"

Joy in nature

Studies have shown that connecting with the natural environment is often a joyful experience⁴, and approaching half of our older people talked about the joys of the outdoors, whether that was on a **sunny beach** or enjoying the flora and fauna of **green spaces** (39%). About one in five people who talked about being outside mentioned their gardens (19%).

While for some people, tending their **gardens or balconies** was a joyful activity, very often our respondents suggested it was just about being outside: breathing **fresh air**, feeling warm in the **sunshine**, hearing or watching **birds**. Previous research suggests that even “passive engagement with an activity such as gardening can still result in joy when individuals can engage with nature and watch plants grow, enabling discussion and social interactions,”⁴ and that gardens are a space of connection with life itself:

“The garden is a place to sense and to find comfort, to add colour and taste to life, and to seek the tranquillity of nature. It is a place to feel healthy, optimistic, and alive. The garden is also a place to relate the past and present... the garden seems to nourish and strengthen.”⁹

Not that everyone’s stories were about peaceful contemplation – one person told us about their daily visits from the local wildlife: “I have a seagull that comes every night at 5:30 - 6:00, he calls and wants food. I have taught him to catch the cheese or other things in his mouth - from 3ft, then 6ft - then he gets bored [and] squawks, so I throw the rest of the food on the patio. Then his mates come and it's gone in seconds.”



One in 10 older people said that their **pets** brought them joy, particularly in the form of companionship and walks with a dog.

Nature has proven benefits to mental health, but it can also be enjoyed from inside the home – even watching nature documentaries has been found to have a positive impact for some people¹⁰. While older people recommended getting outside if possible, many also made recommendations that recognised how difficult that might be for some people and suggested inviting the outdoors in.

TIPS FOR ENJOYING NATURE

From our older people



“Get a breath of the outdoors even if only through a window or standing on the doorstep.”



“When the weather's clement, try to get outside, if possible, even to sit in the fresh air. Lifts your spirits. If fit enough, go for a walk - even a short one does your body and mind good.”



“I feed the birds and talk to people in the park.”

From the mental health charity, Mind¹¹



Arrange a comfortable space to sit by a window with a view, even if it's the sky.



Grow plants or flowers on windowsills.



Install a bird feeder on or near your window.



Listen to natural sounds and/or watch videos of nature.



"I have a rose for each one I've loved that has passed on. Every year they bloom it's like having them back - for a while, anyway"

"Pottering in my garden gives me a lot of joy and peacefulness"

"I place some water containers about five centimetres deep outside my window and love to watch the birds and squirrels drinking and bathing"

"I love working in the garden and listening to the birds. One little robin follows me everywhere. When I lost my darling husband 15 years ago, my garden was my salvation"

"I love to read – I find it takes me away to another world, time and place"



"I like reading and my friend buys me books that she knows I like from charity shops. She also brings her little dog to see me, I love to see her and she sits on my lap so I can cuddle her - the dog, not my friend!"

Happiness in hobbies and activities

Around half of our older people referred to their hobbies when discussing what brought them happiness (47%). Recreational **activities offer stimulation and reward**, contributing to good mood as well as having broader and longer term impacts on health and wellbeing by helping to make life feel worthwhile^{16, 3}. Giving up favourite activities, for instance due to poor health, can have the opposite effect⁴.

One third of respondents who talked about hobbies mentioned **reading** (34%). Some people referred simply to enjoying “a good book”, while others were more specific in their tastes, from crime stories to “not novels or biographies but the sort of subjects I can learn from.” For those with impaired vision, **audiobooks** allowed them to continue to do something they love, and some people mentioned local friends or volunteers who brought them reading materials as they could no longer get to a library.

Roughly one in five people said they enjoyed **watching television** and films (19%) or **listening to music** (17%). Classical music was most popular and was described as being “uplifting”, but a couple of respondents mentioned **dancing** to music from the 1940s up to the 1990s and several said they **sing** in choirs or community groups.

On television, documentaries, the news, Strictly Come Dancing, sport and sitcoms were all mentioned, as were quiz shows, which one person suggested, can make it feel “like someone is talking to me”.

One in 10 people said they enjoyed **puzzles and games** (11%), particularly word games. One respondent, aged 91, explained that win or lose, playing chess online was a joy, meeting opponents around the world.

Other interests included **art** (6%), **creative writing** (4%), **needlework** (3%), and **cooking or baking** (3%).

Almost two-thirds of respondents suggested activities to bring moments of joy and happiness into daily life (63%), including the hobbies mentioned here. People referred to the benefits in terms of sustaining **mental agility** and learning new things, meeting people, and having things to ‘get lost in’.

TIPS FOR FINDING HAPPINESS IN HOBBIES

“Try to learn something new, however trivial. I learnt to crochet in lockdown, and at 86 I have made quite a few nice things which have sold at our summer and winter fetes.”

“Use the TV for events you can no longer go to, like racing and sport.”

“I go to a singing club once a week. They pick me up, I love every minute. I used to sing to the troops in the war”

“Having a cup of tea in bed, watching the news, doing Wordle before the day starts”

“My great joy is to write poetry. My niece, Kitty, puts them onto X (Twitter). One of the joys is for folk to send me a first line, and I write a poem for them.”

“I do crosswords - or should I say, they do me!”



Keeping positive

As well as suggesting that others might find joy in taking up hobbies, spending time outside, and increasing their opportunities to interact with people, approaching one third of our respondents suggested that joy and happiness could be generated by actively embracing positivity (29%). Focusing on the good rather than the bad, practicing gratitude, and staying cheery were all mentioned.

That may seem glib or impossible to some, yet there is evidence to support this kind of thinking. We often think about joy as an emotion – something relatively short-lived, triggered by circumstances, but joy can also be a disposition, whereby someone has a lower threshold for experiencing joy and therefore experiences it more often and from a wider range of circumstances⁵. Adopting a positive outlook on life and seeking to create joy may result in the same¹².

Respondents suggested planning for enjoyment, from doing “one thing a day you enjoy” to putting things into the calendar to look forward to; others suggested taking action to stave off low mood, for instance by making a phone call to a friend after a day alone.

Some 30% of people who espoused a positive outlook spoke of showing love and kindness to others, and one in five specifically mentioned smiling or laughing (19%). Research shows that smiling – even artificially – can improve mental and physical wellbeing¹³.

"Be kind and loving to all you know. You will get it back in bucket loads."

"Keep a smile on your face, you never know when it will become a chat, possibly a friendship."

"Try to laugh."



"Try to feel happy with your lot in life. We have only to look around the world to see the terrible things happening and give thanks to be 'us'. I wake each morning and think, 'Yes! I'm still here'"

Self-contentment is associated with joy⁴, and several of our respondents talked about taking pleasure simply from doing jobs around the house.

"[I enjoy] the satisfaction of tasks done well by myself – e.g. cleaning the house, washing and ironing, finding new recipes to try."

A small number of our 'positive thinkers' urged others to keep pushing themselves and remain open to new experiences rather than "stagnating".

"If it sounds good, do it, try it; you can't fail to enjoy the occasion."

"Believe in yourself. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Go out, do things, be strong."

Positive self-perception as we age has been linked to higher quality of life¹⁴, whereas 'thinking you're old and frail' is associated with poorer health outcomes¹⁵. Feeling that you're doing worthwhile things in life, no matter what those things are, is associated with a broad range of positive outcomes¹⁶.



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