retirees who belong to social groups are happier and healthier

social planning for retirement may be as important as financial planning. Retirees who participate regularly in organized social groups experience a better quality of life and lower risk of death during the transition from work to retirement.

focus of study

This study explores the benefits of belonging to social groups for the newly retired. It uses population data from the English Longitudinal Study of Aging to compare the impacts on quality of life and likelihood of premature death of the number of group memberships held before and after retirement.

background

Retirement is a major life transition that poses significant challenges to health. A number of longitudinal studies have shown that many retirees experience a sharp decline in health immediately after they retire. However, the fact that this decline is not universal suggests that other factors, beyond leaving one’s job, determine how well retirees adjust to the transition.

An emerging body of literature points to the profound impact of social factors on people’s physical and psychological health. Belonging to social groups gives people a sense of purpose and belonging. Evidence shows that social relationships are a stronger predictor of longevity than physical exercise, smoking or alcohol consumption; and social engagement is associated with reduced depression and enhanced cognitive health.

So how is social connectedness relevant for retirees? Retirement typically involves giving up group memberships associated with work life – memberships that have defined people’s sense of self for years. At the same time, it provides opportunities for new group memberships and types of social connection. This is the first study to examine the protective benefits of social group memberships for quality of life and health in retirement.

findings

the more social groups a person belongs to early in retirement, the lower their risk of premature death. leaving a social group in the early years of retirement increases the risk of death. retirees who were members of two social groups before retirement had a 2 per cent risk of death in the first six years of retirement if they kept up their membership in both groups. the risk increased to 5 per cent if they gave up membership in one of the groups, and to 12 per cent if they gave up both memberships.

the number of social group memberships held in retirement is more important to the health and well-being of retirees than their pre-retirement memberships.
The effect of social group memberships on mortality in retirement is similar to that of physical exercise. The increase in the risk of death when retirees lose social groups is comparable to that for active people who slow down or stop exercising after retirement. If someone exercised vigorously once a week before they retired and kept it up after retirement, their risk of dying over the next years was 3 per cent. This risk increased to 6 per cent if they decreased this frequency to less than weekly and to 11 per cent if they stopped exercising altogether.

Social group memberships affect retirees’ quality of life. The quality of life for retirees falls by around 10 per cent for every group membership lost in the year following retirement.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers used data collected by the English Longitudinal Study of Aging to assess the impact of social group memberships on the quality of life and mortality of 424 individuals during a six-year period as they transitioned from formal employment to retirement. All participants were at least 50 years old. Social groups covered a diverse range of organizations, clubs or societies including sports teams, social clubs, cultural groups and church congregations.

The study controlled for age, gender, relationship status and socioeconomic status, along with pre-retirement quality of life and physical health, to rule them out as alternative explanations for the patterns observed. The control group did not undergo the transition to retirement.

IMPLICATIONS

This study suggests that social planning – maintaining or developing new group memberships – may be as important in promoting health and well-being in retirement as financial and medical planning. As well as the theoretical implications for our understanding of the determinants of retiree quality of life and health, its findings have significant practical implications for supporting people as they transition from a life of work to retirement.

REFERENCE