

SONOMA SENIORS TODAY

Connection is Prevention: A Conference on Wellness and Mental Health

By Denise Johnson, MS, Senior Nutrition and Health Director

On Thursday, September 18th, more than 100 older adults, caregivers, and professionals came together at the first annual Connection is Prevention Conference, a half-day event dedicated to wellness, mental health, and the power of community. Hosted by the Council on Aging and the Sonoma County Department of Health Services Behavioral Health Division, the free conference emphasized a simple yet powerful message: meaningful human connection is one of the most effective tools in preventing mental health challenges and fostering resilience among older adults.

A Timely Conversation

September is recognized as Mental Health Month, making the conference especially timely. Sonoma County data shows a sharp rise in suicide deaths among adults 75 and older, underscoring



the urgent need for education, prevention, and building strong social ties to combat isolation.

“This is more than a conference, it’s a call to action,” said Denise Johnson, Senior Nutrition and Health Director at Council on Aging. “Through learning, sharing, and connecting, we can ensure that no one has to walk their journey alone.”

Adding to that call to action were remarks from Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Chris Coursey and Brendan Sweeney, representing Congressman Mike Thompson. Both emphasized the importance of investing in prevention, supporting families, and strengthening community networks to address the urgent mental health needs of older adults.

Workshops and Breakout Sessions

Participants had the opportunity to take part in interactive workshops designed to provide practical skills and tools for everyday life:

- **QPR – Question, Persuade, Refer:** A suicide prevention training that taught participants how to recognize warning signs and connect at-risk individuals to help
- **Supporting Our Well-Being - Grounding and Meditation:** A hands-on session where



attendees learned simple breathing, grounding, and meditation practices to reduce stress and improve daily wellness

- **Living Well, Aging Well - The PEARLS Approach to Mental Health:** An introduction to the nationally recognized PEARLS program, which helps older adults manage depression, isolation, and life transitions through evidence-based strategies
- **Balance, Safety, Independence - Your Fall Prevention Toolkit:** A practical workshop focused on balance, home safety, and exercises to reduce the risk of falls while maintaining independence

Inspiring Voices

The conference also featured a panel of local leaders and experts who shared perspectives on mental health, aging, and community resilience. Panelists included:

- Todd Finnemore, Psy.D., Clinical & Forensic Geropsychologist
- Mary-Frances Walsh, Executive Director, NAMI Sonoma County
- Herman J. Hernandez, Founder of Los Cien
- Kathleen Miller, Sonoma County Behavioral Health Board Member
- Dennis Pocekay, Retired Physician and Petaluma City Councilmember

Their conversation emphasized both the challenges and opportunities in building a community where older adults are supported, connected, and valued.



Building Community Through Connection

Beyond the educational sessions, the event fostered connection through shared meals, networking, and a resource fair featuring local organizations dedicated to serving older adults. Attendees enjoyed early morning music by Craig Matsuda, a continental breakfast, lunch, raffle prizes, and plenty of opportunities to engage directly with experts and neighbors.

The energy in the room reflected a collective commitment to caring for one another. From practical wellness tips to moments of heartfelt connection, participants left empowered to act in their own lives and communities.

As one attendee noted, “It’s rare to have so many resources, experts, and community members come together in one place. Today gave me tools I can use and reminded me that I’m not alone.”

Looking Ahead

The success of the inaugural Connection is Prevention Conference sets the stage for future gatherings. By investing in education, prevention, and social connection, Sonoma County is taking meaningful steps toward addressing the mental health needs of its growing senior population.

“Connection is prevention—and it starts with each of us,” said Johnson. “Together, we can create a community where every older adult feels seen, supported, and valued.”

Cornucopia art by Lilly Cantabile, Pixabay

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living better, together.

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LEARN

HEAL

MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Are you compassionate, a good listener, and eager to support others?

Join our Senior Peer Support Program and help older adults in Sonoma County who may be feeling stressed, sad, or overwhelmed

WHY VOLUNTEER?

• Provide friendly one-on-one in-home support to seniors.

• Offer encouragement and a listening ear for those facing emotional or mental health challenges.

• Help participants build confidence, strengthen coping skills, and find hope.

• Receive training and ongoing support.

• Share your experiences, strengths, and life lessons with those who need it the most.

• Make a lasting impact on the wellbeing of older adults in your community.

Location: Sonoma County

Council on Aging | 30 Kawana Springs Road | Santa Rosa, CA 95404

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Legacy



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To enhance the quality of life for our aging community by providing services that promote wellbeing and maintain independence.

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PUZZLES & GAMES

Puzzle solutions are on page 8

WORD SCRAMBLE
"Tastes of the Season"

1. EKYUR	- - - - -
2. AMH	- - -
3. TEKLSA	- - - - -
4. USALPECEAP	- - - - -
5. FTGFUNSI	- - - - -
6. ATELSMA	- - - - -
7. ZOEPOL	- - - - -
8. NPPMUIK EIP	- - - - -
9. NECSPA	- - - - -
10. EOOIKSC	- - - - -
11. ARRNCEBIERS	- - - - -
12. AUAKRRESTU	- - - - -

SUDOKU - Medium

		5			8	6		1
7				2				9
8	4						3	
	7	3	6	8	5	1		
	5		2					
2	9			1				3
		7			2	8	5	4
6							1	7
			7	9			2	

SUDOKU - Hard

1		9			8			
				1	3	8		
					4			2
2	7							
	4	8				7		6
				7		9	1	
4		7		9			8	
	9		8					
	3		1					4

WORD SEARCH
"Celebration"

ORNAMENT	FESTOON
MENORAH	SNOWFLAKE
BELLS	DREIDEL
MISTLETOE	FAROLITOS
GARLAND	RIBBON
BAUBLE	FAMILY

CROSSWORD PUZZLE
"Happy Holidays"

ACROSS

- 1 Heavenly body visible from earth as point of light
5 Lawyer (abbr.)
9 Measuring instrument
13 Evergreen tree
14 Earth has a N. and S. one
15 Eating house
16 Volcano
17 Ancient Indian
18 Behind
19 Hollow brick structure for passing smoke from a fire
21 Lease
23 Visit
24 American Cancer Society (abbr.)
25 "Pathfinder" maker
29 New Year's _____
30 Kernel
32 BB association
33 Type of fur
36 Christmas hymn
37 Kimono sash
38 Musical treble ____
39 Relating to the ear
40 Chilly
41 Grease
42 1000 megabytes
43 Deciliter
44 Applesauce brand
45 Chum
46 Potato sprouts
47 Executive
48 Writings
50 Expression of surprise
51 Wing
54 Association (abbr.)
56 Day on which ordinary business activity is suspended
58 Sword
61 Vessel
63 Demonstration
64 Inaccuracy
65 Frog
66 Sign
67 Deprive
68 Turfs
69 Lassie

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8		9	10	11	12		
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58	59	60					61	62				63			
64							65					66			
67							68					69			

By Jimmy and Evelyn Johnson - www.qets.com

DOWN

- 1 Eyeglasses
2 Religious offering
3 Red headed orphan
4 Stack of paper
5 For each one
6 Frozen pizza brand
7 What a nurse gives
8 Time period
9 Present
10 Colony insect
11 "To the right!"
12 Be incorrect
15 O.T. prophet
20 Central church part
22 Recruit
26 Snout
27 Monastery superior
28 Hammer's partner
29 Santa's helper
30 Pieces of stiff paper used to send greetings
31 Spoken
33 View
34 Anonym
35 Metal objects that make pleasant sounds when hit
36 Copper (abbr.)
39 Chasm
40 Murmur
42 Fountain
44 Supper
47 Groups of notes
49 Baseball player Hank ____
50 Leading
51 Water retention
52 Tinseled cloth
53 French city
55 Meshes
57 False god graven image
58 Stitch
59 To be
60 Undergarment
62 Date

WORD SEARCH
"Celebration"

S	Z	U	F	C	V	T	Q	C	D	X	A	Y	G	K	F
J	Z	B	Z	D	K	B	Y	Q	L	J	M	B	Q	I	K
E	E	H	O	Y	N	J	S	N	O	W	F	L	A	K	E
Z	W	X	V	N	X	B	E	L	L	S	K	Z	H	I	S
A	F	O	T	A	D	R	R	O	G	T	N	Y	I	O	F
H	E	M	B	Y	G	L	W	Z	O	A	E	C	T	J	A
M	S	E	B	X	K	F	T	O	O	W	R	I	D	R	M
M	T	N	I	D	R	E	I	D	E	L	L	L	P	C	I
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F	C	X	Z	Z	U	R	I	B	B	O	N	N	D	Y	S
J	M	U	E	A	O	W	E	Y	U	P	F	D	B	S	F
B	J	N	B	O	R	N	A	M	E	N	T	P	I	Q	Y
W	V	D	C	O	M	I	S	T	L	E	T	O	E	T	A

The Power of Physical and Social Wellness

By Denise Johnson, MS, Senior Nutrition and Health Director

Movement is medicine—and the benefits extend far beyond just staying fit. Regular physical activity not only enhances your energy and strength but is a key factor in maintaining long-term independence and emotional wellbeing.



Photo-Centre for Ageing Better, Pexels

Physical Benefits of Movement

- Boosts energy levels and reduces fatigue
- Preserves muscle mass and bone density, which naturally decline with age
- Releases endorphins, which improve mood and reduces stress, anxiety, and depression
- Supports independence, allowing us to maintain daily functioning longer into older age

In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that seven of the ten most common chronic conditions can be prevented through regular physical activity. Yet, 80% of U.S. adults are not meeting recommended activity levels. This highlights an important opportunity to improve our nation’s health and resilience—especially as we age.

Brain Health Starts with Engagement

Just like your body, your brain needs stimulation to stay sharp. Keeping your mind active can improve cognitive function, delay memory decline, and promote emotional wellness.

Simple ways to boost brain health include:

- Solving puzzles or brain teasers
- Learning a new skill or hobby
- Stepping outside your routine
- Engaging in thoughtful conversations
- Staying active with 30 minutes of daily exercise
- Getting quality sleep and staying hydrated

Creativity: A Fun Path to Cognitive Wellness

One of the most enjoyable ways to support your intellectual and cognitive health is through creative engagement.

- Sketching objects around the house
- Taking photographs
- Crafting
- Playing a musical instrument
- Trying a new recipe
- Dancing to your favorite music

These not only stimulate the brain but also add joy and meaning to daily life.



Photo by Olli, Pexels

Social Wellness: A Lifeline for Healthy Aging

Research consistently shows that social connection is just as vital as diet and exercise when it comes to healthy aging.

- Improve longevity
- Boost immunity



Alisa Dyson, Pixabay

- Reduce the risk of chronic diseases.
- Help manage anxiety and depression.

People who stay socially engaged often report better moods, higher energy, and an overall sense of fulfillment.

Five Simple Ways to Stay Socially Engaged

- 1. Develop a Sense of Purpose**
Find something you’re passionate about—a cause, a hobby, or a project. Purpose gives us a reason to wake up each day with excitement.
- 2. Check In on Friends and Family**
Make time to call, visit, or write to loved ones. Even small connections make a big difference.
- 3. Make a Difference**
Volunteer in your community or simply help a neighbor. Giving back enhances both mental and physical health.
- 4. Get Moving Together**
Find a physical activity you enjoy and invite others to join. Shared activity strengthens bonds and makes movement more fun.
- 5. Get Online**
Use social media or online communities to reconnect with old friends or meet new ones. Play games, join groups, and stay connected—virtually or in person.

In summary, wellness is multidimensional. By staying physically active, stimulating your brain, and building meaningful connections, you can enhance your quality of life at any age. Small daily habits lead to big, long-term rewards—for your body, your mind, and your spirit.

Preventing the Holiday Blues

By Dr. Kathryn K. Ridout, Psychiatrist, Kaiser Permanente, Santa Rosa

The holiday season is often described as “the most wonderful time of the year,” but for many, it can also bring feelings of sadness, stress, or isolation. Mixed emotions are common—especially if past experiences have shaped how we feel about this time of year. Even those who love the holidays may find themselves overwhelmed by the pressure to host perfect gatherings, buy ideal gifts, or create flawless memories.



Dr. Kathrin K. Ridout

It’s important to remember that the holidays are not just for others—they’re for you, too. Taking care of yourself is essential. That means doing things you enjoy, practicing moderation, and giving yourself permission to slow down. Whether it’s food, social events, or holiday tasks, balance is key. You don’t have to attend every party or participate in every tradition, especially if it adds to your stress. It’s okay to say no.

One of the most powerful ways to protect your mental health during the holidays is to prioritize meaningful connection. Spend time with people who bring you joy and share your values.

Volunteering, connecting with others, and participating in meaningful activities can also help you feel more grounded and joyful.

Maintaining healthy habits can also help you stay grounded. Regular exercise, good sleep, balanced nutrition, and limiting substances like alcohol and marijuana all contribute to better emotional and physical wellbeing. These practices can help you enjoy the season more fully.

If you find that stress or sadness begins to interfere with your daily life, such as trouble sleeping, persistent anxiety, or feelings of depression, it may be time to seek support from a mental health professional.

Apps like Headspace and Calm can help with more manageable feelings of stress. Many of these apps are free for Kaiser Permanente members and available through app stores.

It’s also important to acknowledge that not everyone celebrates Christmas. Seeing holiday decorations and festivities can feel isolating if they don’t reflect your traditions. Fortunately, the Bay Area is rich in cultural diversity. Social media and community boards are great places to find events that align with your beliefs and bring you a sense of belonging.

The holidays don’t have to be perfect—they just need to be authentic. With intention, self-care, and connection, you can navigate the season in a way that supports your wellbeing.



Photo by Cottonbro, Pexels

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Research Scientist, Kaiser Permanente, Northern California Division of Research
Director, Psychiatry Research Network
Dr. Ridout has been a psychiatrist with Kaiser Permanente since 2017. Her work focuses on translational psychiatry, clinical innovation, and mentorship.*

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DEPRESSION

PTSD

TRAUMA

HOPELESS

ANXIETY

ANGER

SUICIDAL

Agency	Program Name	Description	Phone	Website
Buckelew Programs	Family Service Coordination	Provides education, support groups and resources for mental health and substance use	707-571-8452	buckelew.org/services/sonoma-county/family-services-coordination
Council on Aging	PEARLS	Coaches older adults with mild depression to create happier, healthier and better quality of life	707-525-0143 Ext. 130	nreynolds@councilonaging.com
Council on Aging	Senior Peer Support	Provides in-home counseling and weekly support to older adults	707-525-0143 Ext. 106	mkatz@councilonaging.com
National Alliance on Mental Illness	NAMI Sonoma County	Provides Sonoma County residents with free mental health support, online groups, resources and education	866-960-6264	namisonomacounty.org
West County Community Services	Counseling Services	Offers individual counseling and support groups for men and women	707-545-4551	westcountyservices.org/counseling
County of Sonoma Health Services (Behavioral Health)	Psychiatric Emergency Services	Provides 24 hour psychiatric emergency mental health services and referrals	707-565-4850	sonomacounty.ca.gov/health-and-human-services/health-services/divisions/behavioral-health/services/crisis-services
Department of Veterans Affairs	Veterans Crisis Line	Provides Veterans the help needed during a crisis 24/7	988 Press 1	veteranscrisisline.net
Goodwill Industries of the Redwood Empire	Peer Warmline Connection	Offers supportive, caring, non-judgmental listeners for people in a crisis or experiencing troubling thoughts or feelings	707-523-0550	www.gire.org
National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline	Suicide and Crisis Hotline	Provides free and confidential emotional support to people experiencing suicidal or emotional distress 24/7	988	988lifeline.org



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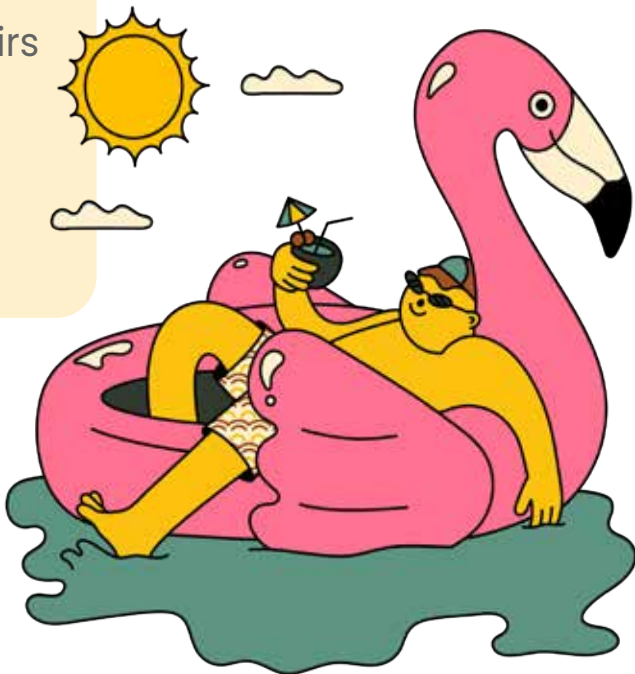
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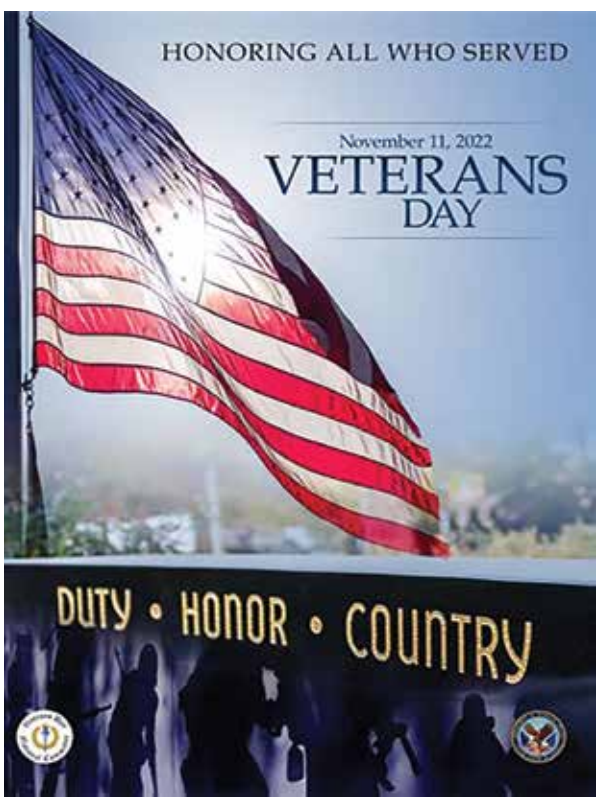


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 **CA** council on aging



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SCRAMBLE "Tastes of the Season"

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2. AMH	HAM
3. TEKLSA	LATKES
4. USALPECEAP	APPLESAUCE
5. FTGFUNSI	STUFFING
6. ATELSMA	TAMALES
7. ZOEPOL	POZOLE
8. NPPMUIK EIP	PUMPKIN PIE
9. NECSPA	PECANS
10. EOOIKSC	COOKIES
11. ARRNCEBIERS	CRANBERRIES
12. AUAKRRESTU	SAUERKRAUT

SUDOKU - Medium

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7	6	1	5	2	3	4	8	9
8	4	9	1	7	6	2	3	5
4	7	3	6	8	5	1	9	2
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SUDOKU - Hard

1	6	9	2	5	8	4	3	7
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8	3	5	1	2	7	6	9	4

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Community Table Program - A place to come together

By Diana Stebner, Community Table Volunteer

Once a week throughout Sonoma County, Council on Aging (COA) hosts a lunch program at various sites known as Community Table or Congregate Dining. Seniors gather to enjoy meals and quality time with one another.

Nutritious and Delicious

For most of the locations, head chef Rhonda Boczon prepares the meals at COA headquarters’ industrial kitchen in Santa Rosa. Every dish follows nutrition guidelines and is carefully crafted to taste delicious. The chef also accommodates vegetarians, offering many flavorful meat-free options.

Entrées include Lemon Chicken, Italian Pork Ragu, and Beef Meatballs with Marinara. Vegetarian entrées include Lentil Cacciatore, Tofu Teriyaki, and Chickpea Alfredo. Every meal comes with a healthy grain, vegetables, fruit, and milk. After cooking, the meals are packaged and delivered to dining sites. A site coordinator at each location completes the preparation and plates the food. Many sites also rely on dedicated volunteers to help with serving and cleanup.

More than Just Lunch

While diners love the tasty food, many also come for the camaraderie. Communal meals provide opportunities to connect with peers, forge new friendships, and build support networks. For seniors who may feel isolated, Community Table offers conversation, connection, and socialization. Research shows that socializing can improve cognitive function, boost mood, and even strengthen the immune system.

Bingo and Prizes

Once a month, some dining sites host bingo. A few basic games begin the event, with winners selecting prizes such as a garden sign, picture frame, porcelain tea cup, or notepad set. After the warm-up rounds, players move on to “blackout,”



Windsor dining site attendees enjoying Bingo!

a game where they aim to cover every space on their card. The grand prize for blackout is a \$25 gift card to a local grocery store.

Entertainment and Fun

In addition to Bingo, activities may include puzzles, arts and crafts, and board games. Occasionally, interns or staff from COA give informative talks on health topics, such as diet and nutrition. Sometimes a live local band entertains diners. Most recently, the Windsor location welcomed Take Your Medicine, an amazing five-piece bluegrass group.

Experience Congregate Dining with Us!

If you’d like to try our Community Table program to enjoy a delicious meal, and meet new friends, please call 707-525-0143 ext. 128 to reserve your spot. We’d love to have you join us!

Eligibility Requirements

- A Sonoma County adult 60 years of age or older (except Petaluma residents)
- A spouse of any age who is a program participant 60 years of age or older
- A person with a disability under 60 years of age who resides in housing facilities occupied primarily by older individuals at which congregate nutrition services are provided
- A disabled individual who resides at home with and accompanies an older individual who participates in the program

Program Requirements

- Reserve your meal at least one week in advance

How to Practice Eating Healthy During the Holidays

By Megan Atha, CSUS Food, Nutrition and Dietetics Graduate

The holidays are a joyous time when people come together and share food and memories with those they care about. However, if you have dietary restrictions, eating at a potluck-style meal with your loved ones can be challenging. This article will give tips for eating healthy while keeping your health priorities during the holidays.

One thing you can do to practice healthy eating during the holidays is to control how much food you eat. Older adults need fewer calories for their bodies: 1600 calories, which equals about 550-650 calories per meal. A way to reduce your calorie intake at holiday meals is to use a smaller plate. Regular dining plates are usually 10-12 inches in diameter. If you use a salad plate, which is typically 7.5-9 inches in diameter, you can give yourself the illusion of eating more food than you actually do. Eating on a smaller plate also allows you to portion your food. This is because when you finish your plate, you can decide if you want more food or if you are already full.

During mealtimes, it is crucial that you listen to your body so that you know when you are full and are not overeating. On the hunger/fullness scale, you want to be at a level 5 or 6 after a meal. This is when you feel satiated (feeling neither hunger nor fullness) or mildly full with no discomfort. During the holidays, it is common to be at a level 9, which



is called “Thanksgiving-stuffed”, with the possibility of extreme discomfort after a meal. This can leave you feeling fatigued and sluggish, which is not what you want to happen. You want your meals to leave you feel replenished and ready to continue your day.

Something that may be common during the holiday season that is not beneficial for your health is saving your appetite for the big holiday meal. Doing this can involve skipping meals and snacks throughout the day so that you can eat more of the holiday meal later. It can also result in intense cravings and overeating later in the day. Skipping meals throughout the day can lower your blood sugar, which is something you don’t want to do, especially if you are diabetic.

Consider informing the person who is hosting the holiday event about your dietary restrictions. This can include if you need to limit your sodium intake or you need to keep your blood sugar low.

Letting the host know your dietary restrictions allows them to modify meals for you or add another meal option to the dinner that fits what you are allowed to eat. You could also take a dish or two to the dinner that fits your dietary restrictions, so that you have something there that you know you can eat.

Before the holidays, prepare by discussing your dietary plan with your doctor or dietitian, so you can manage the holidays without stress.

One thing to keep in mind is that it is what you eat consistently that determines your overall health. Your dietary intake doesn’t have to be perfect during holiday meals. As long as you are improving what you eat over time and are not consistently eating poorly, then the holidays shouldn’t be too bad nutrition-wise. Just remember to enjoy the holidays and the people you care about.

Congressman Mike Thompson Joins Council on Aging for Meals on Wheels Ride-Along

Council on Aging was honored to welcome Congressman Mike Thompson for a special visit to our organization. During his time with us, the Congressman met with staff, learned more about our services, and joined a ride-along to deliver meals directly to homebound seniors. This hands-on experience offered Congressman Thompson a firsthand look at the vital role Meals on Wheels plays in supporting older adults—providing not only nutritious meals but also human connection and wellness checks. Our clients were delighted to receive their meals from their Congressman, and the visit highlighted the importance of continued support for programs that allow seniors to age in place with dignity and independence.

We are grateful for Congressman Thompson’s time and commitment to older adults in Sonoma County, and we look forward to continuing our partnership in serving the community.

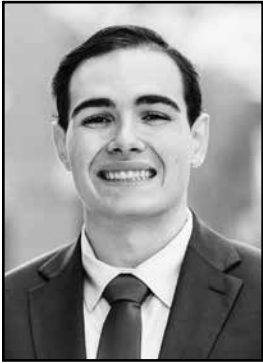


Congressman Mike Thompson and Council on Aging staff

Aging Well With PEARLS

By Kyle Rivers, PEARLS Group Coordinator

Hello Council on Aging family! We are excited to announce Aging Well with PEARLS*, an adapted, group version of the PEARLS (Program to Encourage Active, Rewarding Lives). Aging Well With PEARLS (AWWP) will blend the proven problem-solving tool and activity engagement of the original PEARLS model with an added focus on improving strength, balance, and mobility.



Kyle Rivers

The original PEARLS model is an evidence-based program developed by the University of Washington. It was designed for older adults living with depression and for social isolation. In the original model, participants meet one-on-one with a PEARLS coach over a four to six-month period. Working collaboratively with the coach, participants apply a 7-step problem-solving tool to address challenges present in their lives that are contributing to symptoms of depression. The PEARLS program is intended to help break a downward cycle of depression and/or isolation that can occur when someone experiences a buildup of problems in their life, along with reduced physical, social, and pleasant activities.

Aging Well with PEARLS (AWWP) has been adapted from the original PEARLS program model in a few ways. First, the original format calls for clients and coaches to meet one-on-one, while the AWWP program will be held in small groups. While engaging the problem-solving tool, this small group format will encourage social connectedness and increased activity while helping to reduce social isolation. AWWP will also focus on physical wellbeing. At each group session,

participants will engage in physical activity to help improve strength, balance, mobility, and coordination for healthier lifestyles and lower fall risk. Research indicates that physical activity itself has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression.

AWWP small group cohorts will meet twice weekly for ten weeks. The sessions will be led by our two Aging Well With PEARLS coaches. We are excited to announce that former Fall Prevention Coordinator, Kyle Rivers, will be rejoining Council on Aging as a Co-Group Coordinator alongside Juliana Balistreri. Kyle and Juliana each bring a strong passion for healthy aging to their work, and the AWWP program will emphasize social connectedness.

Juliana is a PEARLS Coach with diverse human services experience, including health care navigation, case management, information & resources, and integrative wellness. In addition to being a PEARLS coach, Juliana has served in several other client service positions at COA. She also served on the steering committee for My Care, My Plan: Speak Up Sonoma County, an advance care planning initiative. She was a founding member of the Collaborative on Positive Aging, is certified in Integrative Yoga Therapy and is trained as an End-of-Life Doula.

Kyle brings a physical health focus to the program, having earned a degree in Kinesiology from the University of Nevada, Reno. With a strong foundation in human movement and exercise science, Kyle is passionate about promoting healthy aging through physical activity and social connection. As the former Fall Prevention Coordinator at Council on Aging, he’s developed and led a program to enhance mobility and reduce fall risk among seniors. Kyle’s expertise in designing safe, effective exercise routines tailored to older adults complements AWWP’s mission to integrate physical health with mental wellness.

Aging Well with PEARLS is committed to

fostering community and connection to help ensure that participants feel supported and empowered in their journey toward even more active, rewarding lives.

The Aging Well with PEARLS program is more than just a program—it’s a place where seniors can build resilience, connect with others, and embrace healthier, more active lives. By combining the proven problem-solving strategies of PEARLS with group physical activity and social connection, AWWP offers a holistic approach to aging well in Sonoma County. We invite you to join us for this wonderful opportunity or spread the word to someone who might benefit. To see if this program is a good fit for you or refer a loved one, contact the Council on Aging at (707) 525-0143 Extension 140, or email krivers@councilonaging.com. Together, let’s take steps toward a stronger, more connected future!

**The group model is based on the PEARLS model that was developed at the University of Washington.*

Fall Quinoa Salad with Beets and Asian Pears

INGREDIENTS:
Makes 8-10 Servings

- 2 Cups Quinoa (Rinsed)
- 4 Cups Chopped Massaged Kale
- 6 Chopped Green Onions (Green Parts Only)
- 3 Steamed Beets Cut into Cubes
- 2 Cups Cucumber (Slice into 1/2" Rounds & Quarter)
- 3 Asian Pears (Cut into Cubes)
- 6 Sliced Radishes
- 3/4 Cups Roasted Sunflower Seeds
- Asian Sesame Seed Salad Dressing (Your Choice)
- Candied Pecans as a garnish (Optional)

METHOD:
Rince 2 cups quinoa and cook in 4 cups of water on medium high until it comes to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer covered until water is absorbed. Let cool completely. Add about 1 tsp salt (or to taste) to cooled quinoa and fluff to combine.

Clean and chop 4 cups of raw kale. Remove any stems. In a bowl, massage kale with your hands for about 3-5 minutes until heavy fibers are broken down. Add massaged kale to cooled bowl of quinoa along with onions, cucumbers, pears, radishes and sunflower seeds. Fluff to combine.

Transfer quinoa mixture to a serving bowl. This salad is best with an Asian Sesame Seed or Sesame Seed and Ginger Dressing. If serving immediately, you can add sesame seed dressing to quinoa mixture and fluff to combine. Tip: Selecting a Sesame Seed Salad Dressing that you love will make all the difference, or you can make your own.

Arrange chopped beets around the top edge of the bowl (mixing beets into the quinoa will turn the quinoa pink.) Optional: Add candied pecans on top as a garnish.

Making the Most of the Holidays as a Caregiver: Practical Tips to Create Comfort and Connection

By Jamie Escoubas, President & CEO

The holiday season often brings images of joy, togetherness, and tradition—but for those caring for a loved one with Alzheimer’s or another form of dementia, the season may look and feel very different. As a caregiver, you may carry not only the weight of planning and caretaking, but also the quiet grief of change: traditions that no longer fit, roles that have shifted, and the emotional toll of seeing a loved one’s memory fade.

And yet, it is still possible to experience moments of connection, comfort, and even joy—especially when you start with caring for yourself.

Let Go of Perfection and Set Realistic Expectations

One of the greatest gifts you can offer yourself this season is **permission**—permission to scale back, simplify, or even skip certain holiday traditions. The holidays don’t have to be perfect to be meaningful.

- **Be gentle with yourself.** You are doing a lot, and it’s okay if not everything gets done. Prioritize rest where you can
- **Acknowledge what’s changed.** It’s okay to feel grief, frustration, or sadness. The holidays may look different—and that deserves space and compassion
- **Redefine success.** A quiet moment together, a shared smile, or a memory sparked by a favorite song can be just as valuable as a grand gathering
- **Keep it small and simple.** Hosting smaller gatherings, simplifying meals, and letting go of elaborate plans can ease the load for everyone



Jamie Escoubas

Creating Space for Meaningful Moments

While it may not be possible to recreate holidays of the past, there are still many ways to **share joy** with your loved one in ways that honor where they are now.

Here are some gentle, caregiver-friendly activities that can create connections without overwhelming either of you:

- **Bake together** – Let them stir, smell, or decorate. Familiar scents and tastes can evoke comforting memories
- **Sing holiday songs** – Music often taps into long-term memory. Choose familiar tunes and sing along together
- **Look through old photos** – Reminiscing with pictures can spark recognition and storytelling
- **Watch a classic movie** – Choose something light, familiar, and enjoyable for both of you
- **Wrap gifts together** – A shared activity, even if simple, can feel inclusive and festive
- **Read holiday cards aloud** – Sharing messages from friends and family can create warmth and connection

Keep in mind: **the goal isn’t to “do it all” but to connect where you can.** Even small moments can have a lasting impact.

Taking Care of Yourself Is Not Optional—It’s Essential

It’s easy to focus entirely on your loved one’s needs, especially during the holidays. But your wellbeing matters just as much. You cannot pour from an empty cup.

- **Set boundaries:** You are allowed to say no. Protect your energy by choosing what you realistically have the time and space for
- **Ask for help:** Whether it’s letting someone else bring a dish, hiring respite care, or accepting help from a neighbor—support is a strength, not a weakness
- **Schedule quiet time:** Give yourself breaks, even short ones, to decompress and rest



Photo by Cottonbro, Pexels

- **Connect with others:** Reach out to other caregivers or friends who understand. You are not alone

Enjoying the Season Together—On Your Terms

It’s okay if your holidays don’t look like they used to. They don’t have to. What matters most is finding moments of **presence**—with yourself, and with your loved one.

- **Start a new tradition** that fits your current reality—like watching a holiday movie every Christmas Eve or sharing a warm drink by candlelight
- **Let go of expectations** tied to the past. Make room for what works now
- Remember: **joy is still possible**, even in the midst of change

The holidays can be bittersweet—and that’s okay. You’re navigating a path that requires strength, patience, and lots of love. Take a moment to acknowledge all that you do. Your care matters, and so do **you**.

For local dementia resources and support, contact:
Salina Gonzalez, Day Respite Manager
Phone: 707-525-0143 ext. 103
Email: sgonzalez@councilonaging.com

ALZHEIMER’S DAY PROGRAM

For those living with Alzheimer’s disease or other cognitive decline

Compassionate Care • Supported Activities
Meaningful Connections

Activities for your loved one include:

- Gentle Group Exercise
- Dietician Approved Lunch
- Live Music
- Creative Art
- Stimulating Brain Games

Downtown Santa Rosa • Monday thru Friday
Full and Half-Day Schedules Available

Call **Salina Gonzalez**
707-525-0143 x103
sgonzalez@councilonaging.com

Program Fees May Qualify for
Medi-Cal or VA Coverage



30 Kawana Springs Rd., Santa Rosa, CA 95404 • Council on Aging is a 501 (c)(3) Organization 1-30-25



For decades, Council on Aging has had the privilege to offer Day Respite Programs giving seniors who live with dementia a safe and engaging group space to spend their day, while providing caregivers with much-needed respite.

Serving Seniors Since 1966



A free, referral and placement service for seniors and their families serving Sonoma County and beyond

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In-Home Fall Prevention Program Delivers Results

By Denise Johnson, MS, Senior Nutrition and Health Director

The National Council on Aging (NCOA) awarded Council on Aging (COA) of Sonoma County a one-year grant in July 2024 to implement an innovative falls prevention program. I'm excited to share the impact of this important initiative.

Let's begin with the facts: Falls are the leading cause of injury-related death among adults aged 65 and older, and the rates continue to rise. In Sonoma County, where 28% of the population is over age 60, many older adults are homebound and low-income, placing them at even greater risk.

Falls lead to over 3 million emergency room visits and 1 million hospitalizations annually, with older adults particularly vulnerable to hip fractures and traumatic brain injuries. According to our internal Meals on Wheels client survey, 23% of 560 seniors reported experiencing a fall in the past six months. This reality underscores the need for targeted, accessible intervention.

Recognizing this urgent need, COA developed and launched the In-Home Fall Prevention

Program—a personalized wellness initiative designed specifically for older adults who were high risk for falling and faced transportation (were homebound) and financial barriers that limited their access to traditional services.

A Holistic, At-Home Solution

Unlike traditional programs, our 8-week Fall Prevention Program delivered personalized support in seniors' homes, eliminating mobility and transportation hurdles. Services included:

- Customized in-home strength, balance, and mobility exercises
- Emergency preparedness education and ready-to-go bags
- Home safety assessments and referrals
- Ongoing support from a trained Fall Prevention Coordinator

Each participant received a printed booklet of tailored exercises, which they completed weekly with the coordinator and independently.

The program was implemented from July 2024 through June 2025, reaching 19 homebound older adults. The impact of the initiative is reflected in the outcomes detailed below.

Long-Term Benefits - 6-Month Follow-Up

- Many participants continued exercising after the program ended
- A majority reported improved mobility and confidence
- Several noted decreased fear of falling and greater independence

Looking Forward

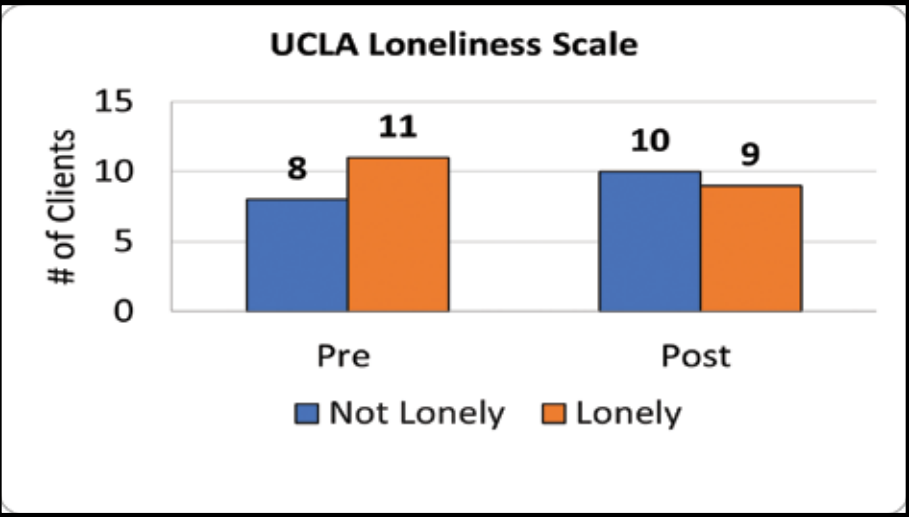
Programs like this prevent falls and promote dignity, independence, and aging in place. As we look to expand, funding and community partnerships will be critical. Council on Aging continues to advocate for scalable, data-driven interventions that ensure all older adults have access to essential wellness services, regardless of income or mobility.

This grant ended June 2025 and we are looking for funders to keep the momentum moving forward.

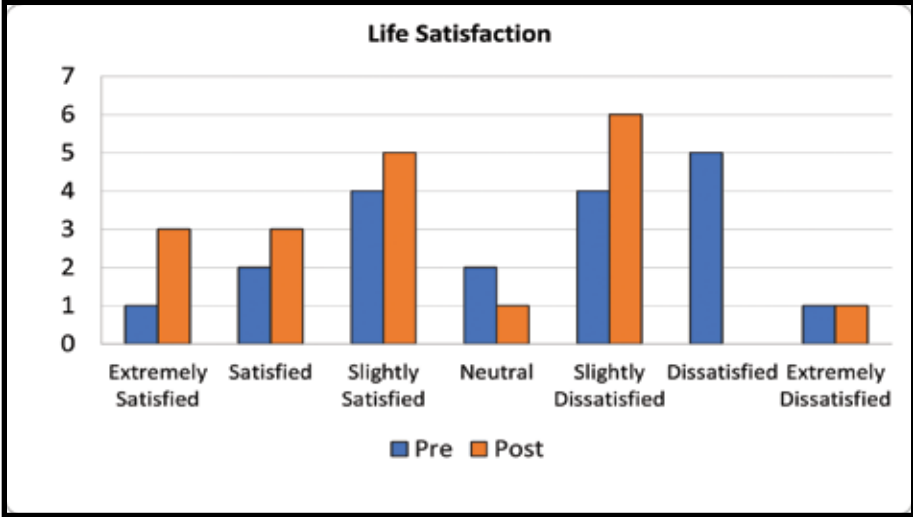
If you would like to sponsor or donate to the In-Home Fall Prevention Program contact:

Denise Johnson,

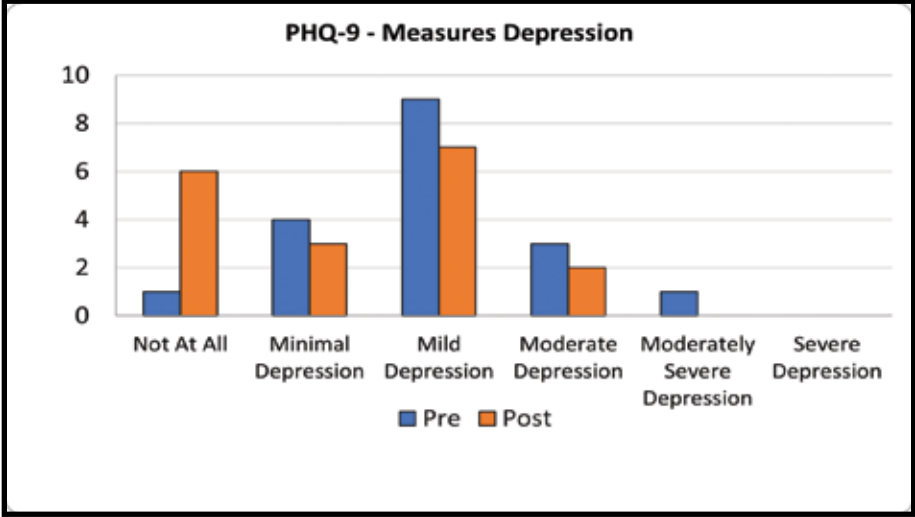
*djohnson@councilonaging.com
(707) 525-0143 ext. 119.*



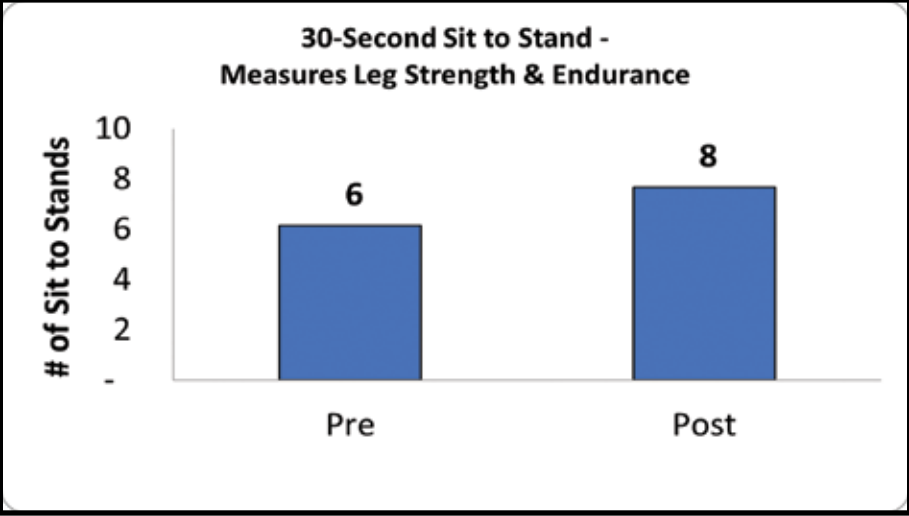
From pre to post, loneliness decreased.



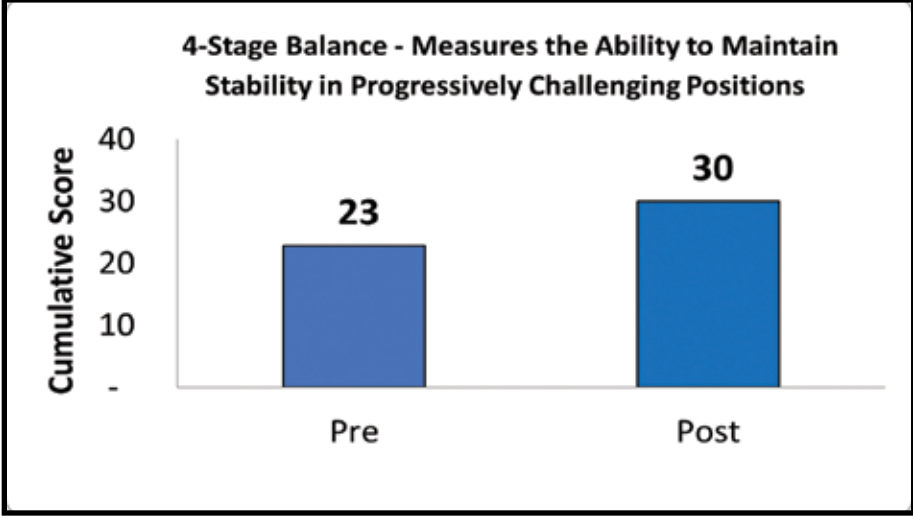
From pre to post, life satisfaction shifted positively overall, with fewer participants reporting dissatisfaction and more reporting satisfaction.



From pre to post, PHQ-9 scores improved, with more participants reporting no depression and fewer showing mild to moderate symptoms.



Data show an increase in the number of sit to stands, demonstrating an increase in leg strength and endurance.



Results show an improvement in the ability to maintain stability.