

The following is an excerpt of an article by Gabriella Boston, originally published in The Washington Times, on November 4, 2009.

The Internet is a mixed bag of good, bad and ugly for the general population. Not so for seniors, though, among whom the Internet is credited with reducing depression, according to a new report. "There are significant mental health consequences of Internet use for seniors," says George Ford, a co-author of the report and a chief economist at the Phoenix Center, which published it. "The study shows it reduces depression by up to 20 percent," Mr. Ford says.

The Phoenix Center is a nonprofit Washington think tank that studies the economics of high-tech industries. Its study on Internet use and its relationship to mental health in seniors was based on data provided by the Health and Retirement Study of the University of Michigan. The sample set was 7,000 non-working seniors.

The study's conclusion is not surprising to retiree Deana Brown, 70, who recently learned how to use a computer at a SeniorNet computer workshop run by Emmaus Services for the Aging in the District. SeniorNet is a nonprofit that provides low- to no-cost computer training for seniors nationwide.

"Every time I sit down and surf the Internet, I have a new window to the world," says Ms. Brown, who is learning how to create greeting cards on the computer.

Being able to experience adventures virtually is particularly important for someone like Ms. Brown, who uses a cane and has limited mobility. She says she also uses the Internet to research prescriptions and communicate and exchange pictures with her sister in Pennsylvania.

Social isolation is a well-established and widespread threat to the mental health of the aging population. One specialty at SeniorNet is teaching seniors how to communicate better and unite virtually -- through pictures, videos and text -- with friends and families divided by geographic distance, says John Alger, interim executive director for SeniorNet.

"Social interaction is key," Mr. Alger says, adding that the report's findings jibe perfectly with what he has seen "on the ground."

But what exactly is it about the Internet that helps reduce depression? Is it improved communication or something else?

That part is not scientifically proved yet, Mr. Ford says, but he adds that it probably has to do with a sense of connectedness and belonging for the Internet-using senior that in turn yields a sense of relevance.

Mr. Ford is working on the next phase of the study, which aims to show exactly what aspects of the Internet are at work in alleviating depression. Release is planned for later this year.

It all makes sense to the Rev. Joseph K. Williams Sr., who runs Emmaus Services for the Aging.

"When you stay active and connected, it helps promote mental and physical health," Mr. Williams says. "The computer lab - and using the Internet in general - are just part of that," he says, adding that the seniors also get a lot out of their "real-life" interactions with other seniors during the computer lab classes. For complete article, read below:

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