

THE POWER OF LOVE

In keeping with Valentine's Day, this article will explore studies which demonstrate that love and lasting relationships are important to our long-term health. Dr. Fisher, an anthropologist from Rutgers University, has "studied love by looking at people's brains using magnetic resonance imaging machines." (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2/13/07) Dr. Fisher discovered that when subjects looked at pictures of their beloved, their MRI scans showed an increase in dopamine, associated with pleasure, in the brain.

None of this may be surprising, but we often don't realize the chemical and physical changes which go on when we're in love – with a person or a pet. **Yes**, studies have shown that having a pet promotes positive well-being, as well. Geriatric researchers in Ontario demonstrated that "caring for a dog or cat also serves as a buffer against isolation and loneliness in elderly people". (*Journal of American Geriatrics Society*, 3/99)

Being in love, with a person or pet, may boost the chemicals in your brain and lead to better well-being. But these are not the only ways to achieve better health. Having an active social life can decrease your vulnerability to illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and alcoholism. Researchers (Bassuk, Glass & Berkman) from Harvard School of Public Health reported, in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, on a 13 years study of almost 3,000 seniors 65 years of age or older. These seniors were interviewed in their homes on 4 occasions. The researchers adjusted their findings for age, ethnicity, education, income and other variables. They found that seniors who had five or six social ties showed considerably less cognitive decline than those who had no social activities, such as playing bingo or cards, dancing, or going to church. They found social activities and friendships reduce stress and stimulate the mind. These researchers proved that you can protect yourself against mental decline, by connecting with activities and friends – a great reason to come to the senior center this and every month.