Social Interaction & COVID-19

NEW RESEARCH at Boston University Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center is testing how different brain problems and environmental situations affect perception, thinking, and memory. The main aim of this study is to better understand the relationship between social interaction and cognitive function. We’d like to understand the possible benefits for memory and thinking of increasing social interaction for older isolated adults, with and without cognitive impairment, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interested participants are given a few standard phone-based or video-based tasks as well as several questionnaires designed to elevate memory, attention, language, reasoning, and daily activities. Participants are asked to answer a range of questions regarding the pandemic and those related to their hobbies, occupation, and day-to-day activities.

We were able to connect with one of the participants and gather her experience with the COVID-19 Social Interaction Study and how our community is coping during the pandemic. Val Nolen is a dedicated member at our center as a Senior Facilitator in our Community Action Council. Ms. Nolen also serves as a liaison between community leaders, clinicians, and educators to support AD research, education, and awareness.

Ms. Nolen expressed that everyone is affected by COVID in one way or another, because they do not have the freedom to be—and hug—the family and friends they love. When asked about her overall experience in the research study, Ms. Nolen was able to tell us that she “admired the caring that took place in the study.” She was particularly motivated to participate in the study because she believes that social intervention has kept her “alert and on her toes.” In terms of how Ms. Nolen has been personally affected by social distancing regulations, she explained that, because she is not physically able to see her family and friends, she has made an effort to talk and engage with members of her church and family via Zoom two to three times a week.

Ms. Nolen shared with us some ways that she has been improving her social isolation by “having a positive attitude and saying a prayer.” She went on to say that she tries to not feel sad and thanks God every day for taking care of everyone, including her family.

Ms. Nolen’s experience upholds our research group’s hypothesis that frequent social interaction is important for our brains—and might even delay or prevent Alzheimer's disease! It also supports our hypothesis that social interaction through interactive communication technologies—although not as good as being with someone in person—is still quite valuable and enjoyable.

If you are interested in volunteering for this study, please contact Dr. Andrew Budson’s team at JoinADC@bu.edu or call us at 857-364-2140.
Note from the Director

Dear ADRC Community,

Wherever you are reading this newsletter, we want to send a warm welcome to each of you. During this challenging time our enthusiasm and research efforts related to understanding, treating, and ending Alzheimer’s disease remain strong! Our team is working in creative ways to continue these efforts during a uniquely challenging year for Alzheimer’s patients, their families, and Alzheimer’s-related research. It is my great pleasure to provide you an overview of our center’s current efforts.

This winter finds the faculty and staff at the Boston University Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center (ADRC) hard at work supporting the wide variety of Alzheimer’s disease-related research and community-building efforts at the ADRC. Through your past involvement, you have facilitated our center’s pursuit of research and educational breakthroughs and enhanced patient care.

The BU ADRC has been highly scientifically productive, contributing > 430 original scientific reports to the literature since 2015. While there are too many exciting publications from our center to name each of them, a few examples of noteworthy contributions from our center’s leaders in 2020 alone have included: an investigation of the characterization of tau deposition in CTE led by Dr. McKee, and a study led by Dr. Alosco of the late contributions of repetitive head impacts and traumatic brain injury to depression and cognition. Specifically, we found that these exposures led to worse mid- and later-life cognitive functioning. Finally, a study led by Drs. Mez and McKee examined the duration of American football play and found that the odds of developing CTE double for every 2.6 years played.

Beyond these scientific accomplishments, our center continues to grow and expand in its vision, leading innovative efforts in genetics, bioinformatics, and novel biomarker development, among other areas. We greatly appreciate the support of the National Institutes of Health, which funds major research efforts of our center, as well as individual donors dedicated to ending Alzheimer’s disease.

Thank you for your continued support of our center and its mission, as none of our efforts would be possible without the dedication of our patients and their families. The BU ADRC continues to have a bright future, with many new investigators joining our team who are part of a myriad of projects furthering the understanding and treatment of Alzheimer’s disease and Alzheimer’s disease-related disorders.

With Best Wishes,

Neil W. Kowall, MD
ADRC Director
Professor of Neurology and Pathology
Why Participating in Research Is Important

Common Questions About Participating in Research

Why should I participate?
Participating in research is one of the most important ways you can help bring an end to Alzheimer’s disease.

What kinds of studies do you have?
Many studies explore how people’s memory and behavior change as they age. Other studies look at physiological changes associated with aging and Alzheimer’s disease. We also have clinical trials that research new treatments for Alzheimer’s disease and related disorders.

I am healthy. Can I still participate?
Yes! Many of our participants have no memory concerns. Many of our studies recruit both healthy volunteers and volunteers with memory problems.

Where do the study visits take place?
You can participate in our main site at Boston Medical Center, in our satellite site in Needham, and some of our studies allow you to participate from the comfort of your home.

How often do I have to participate?
Your participation is always voluntary. Once you enroll in a study, our friendly team will guide you through each step of the process. Some of our studies require only a one-time visit, while others may follow you for weeks, months, or years.

Volunteer for Research
We need you! The Center is currently recruiting adults with and without memory changes to participate in our research studies. We have many different studies for which you may be eligible.

We have several different types of ongoing studies at the ADRC. Each study has its own goals. If you are interested in participating in a study listed, please contact us at JoinADC@bu.edu or call us at 857-364-2140.

Memory and Aging Studies: Our memory and aging studies help us learn about the changes that occur in people’s memory as they age.

Clinical Trials: Clinical trials (or treatment trials) and prevention trials help determine if new or currently used medications can prevent Alzheimer’s disease or slow its progression.

Genetic Studies: Our family and genetic studies look at the link between Alzheimer’s disease and genetics; these studies help us understand genetic risk factors associated with Alzheimer’s disease.

Caregiving Studies: Caregiving studies specifically focus on issues related to activities in daily life, such as driving, coping emotionally with caregiver activities, and support strategies for caregivers.

Imaging Studies: Our imaging studies help us learn how brain images can provide more information about diagnosing and detecting Alzheimer’s disease early, when treatments are most effective.
BU ADRC in the Community

Community Events & Programs
The BU ADRC holds many educational events and programs for community members throughout the Commonwealth. We also conduct numerous educational activities for health care professionals. We are able to tailor each lecture and presentation to the needs of the audience. Visit our website to learn more about upcoming presentations. If you would like us to schedule a time for us to speak to your group, email us at JoinADC@bu.edu.

BU ADRC Student Ambassadors
The BU ADRC Student Ambassador Program enables medical students, graduate students, and undergraduates interested in medicine to participate in a curriculum during the academic year that includes six educational and three outreach events. Activities include monthly dementia-focused didactic meetings, the BU ADRC monthly lecture series, community outreach events, and our BU ADRC Community Action Council meetings focusing on Black participant recruitment. We were happy to have 20 BU ADRC Ambassadors join us virtually.

Meeting of the Minds
The Meeting of the Minds is a collaboration between the BU ADRC, Alzheimer’s Association, Brigham Women’s Hospital Center for AD Research, and the Mass ADRC. Together these informative workshops take place every other month in the community and include a discussion with local researchers on topics like normal aging, memory problems, keeping your brain healthy, and available resources in your community. If you are interested in learning more about Meeting of the Minds, please reach out to us at JoinADC@bu.edu.

Memory Sunday
The second Sunday in June is designated as Memory Sunday within the Black faith community. The purpose is to raise awareness about aging, memory loss, and research opportunities. Through the Black Church, the message of Memory Sunday brings local and national attention to the tremendous burden that Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias place on the African American family. Participating in this unique program is a way to include congregations in the science, research and caregiving of the Alzheimer’s community. Memory Sunday this year will be held virtually on June 13th, 2021. We were able to reach more people this way and hope to expand our reach even further next year. If your faith community would like to learn more, please contact Royisha Young at youngra@bu.edu or call at 857-364-2140.

A Successful Walk to End Alzheimer’s
Each year, our team looks forward to gathering to support the Alzheimer’s Association Walk to End Alzheimer’s. In 2020, we all supported a little differently. Our center and team members gathered independently with our loved ones to support the Greater Boston Walk to End Alzheimer’s in September. Our Outreach, Recruitment, and Engagement Core center were able to raise $3,500! toward the cause. If you are interested in contributing to our team, you can still donate at http://act.alz.org/goto/BUARDC2021.