

Think Tank: Older adults & mental health – Staying connected

Speakers:

Amy Hopkins, LCSW

Featuring members of “The Lunch Bunch” – Catherine, Connie & Pat

Amy Life is better when you share it with people. That's not just words, it's science. When we feel connected, we have less anxiety and depression. And higher self-esteem, stronger immune systems and healthier bodies. We physically and emotionally need to feel wanted, to be seen, heard and valued. I'm glad you're here. Let's connect. Welcome to the Think Tank podcast.

Hi, everyone. This is Amy Hopkins. I'm a licensed clinical social worker and today I am going to introduce you to the lunch bunch. This is a group of women that my mom has been spending time with since I was a kid. They get together every Wednesday. They go to lunch, they share, they talk and they support each other.

I think it's important that we all know the value of connection. It helps our minds. It helps our bodies and it helps our day today. So I want you to listen to this conversation I had with three of the 12 ladies that are in the lunch bunch and I hope you get some fun out of it, just like I did.

[Soft Music]

Amy So I am here with my mom and her friends, and we are talking about mental health kind of throughout the ages. They are...what...how old are you guys? Like 100 and something?

Pat Close

Catherine We're 39 Pushing 80.

Amy Pushing 80. So, Mom, will you say introduce yourself?

Catherine I'm Amy's mom. My name's Catherine.

Connie I'm Connie and I've been in the lunch bunch group and friends with both of them for over 50 years.

Pat And I don't know who I am today. [Laughter] I still don't. I've been thinking about it, but I'm not done yet. I'm Pat.

Amy You're Pat. So the reason I'm talking with all of you is that, first of all, I know how important you guys are to my mom and you guys have a lunch bunch every Wednesday and you get together.

But the reason I wanted to talk to you was I want to talk about mental health throughout the lifespan. And even though you guys are 25 in your brains you're a little older than that in your bodies.

Connie A little bit older.

Pat Way older.

Amy I'm just wondering if you can tell me what you guys do for your mental health.

Catherine So our lunch friends, there's seven of us. We go to the same place every week for a month because we can't make decisions and we all accept that. And we try not to make any stress, we know where we're going. If you can come, fine. If you can't come, that's fine. We'll just talk about you and make fun of you because you didn't come. But we're all on our own. We just don't want any stress.

Amy But getting together having each other.

Pat And it's important to be able to talk to everybody there about any subject and know that it's going to stay. What we say, it's going to stay there. It's not going to be broadcast throughout the whole neighborhood or whatever. And there's been some real tender, real hard discussions along the way.

Amy I bet.

Connie And those discussions between because there's so many of us at least one, but usually more than one of us, has already gone through the situation that that person is talking about. Sometimes it's all of us that we've gone through that maybe it's only one or two of us that there's always somebody there that has been through it that can put their input in it to help.

Amy So you guys are your own little therapy group.

Connie We are. It's cheaper than going to the psychiatrist. [Laughter]

Pat Or maybe it will drive us there. [Laughter]

- Amy What topics you think come up with your friends when it comes to your mental health or taking care of your mental health?
- Catherine We talk about things that we're doing, different books we've read. Some of us like to read, some don't read at all. Some watch TV some don't watch TV at all. But we talk about things that we've done, games that we've played.
- Pat Even playing games and stuff really does keep your mind sharp. It does. I play solitaire. I play different puzzles, word puzzles. You know where you have to or you have to find a word and stuff like a word search. And I'm amazed at how much it really gets your brain kickin'. And I really think it helps to keep you, I'm not going to say sharp, but more aware of words that you might have forgotten and the meaning of them.
- Amy Yeah, it sounds like you guys all do this stuff. I know my mom does those puzzles because she sends them to me but so is it games? Is it games that help keep your mood light? Games and people?
- Catherine Different books too, a variety of books. Right now I'm reading an autobiography of Laura Bush. I'm also reading one about pyramids and lizards. So a variety of books. I get up in the middle of the night and play the piano. That's good therapy for me. That always makes my mental health better.
- Pat Yeah, get up in the middle of night and go to the bathroom. [Laughter] That's good for the physical.
- Amy Well, yeah. Should we take a number to see how many times we all get up in the middle of the year to do that. [Laughter] Let's see, Pat's at 2 hours. Mom, what are you at?
- Catherine That's close enough, close enough. [Laughter]
- Amy Yeah, and so when you guys all get together, what are people your tender ages struggling with the most would you say, as far as mental health? Is that struggling with loss of independence or is it your kids don't come around enough or
- Connie Amen
- Catherine Amen
- Pat I think that what are the biggest things at this age, and I think everybody in our group will agree it's physical health that affects your mental health.
- Connie Yeah.

Pat And I can't think of one person in our group, even though Lois is probably the healthiest, so every one of us has some type of a physical affects your mental.

Amy Yeah. Commiserate.

Pat And in our group, we can at least talk to each other, and you have a husband. Oh, you can't talk to him about anything important [Laughter] but we can talk to each other and there's no judgment or you know, it's just an open conversation and they're welcome to put in their input and they can say, well, I think you're wrong. And we'll say, well, why do you think that? And, you know, it's not, I don't think we've ever, ever left one of our lunches being unhappy with another person to the point we couldn't go and still talk to them and be friends with them.

Connie We don't argue. And physically I was physically, physically really healthy until I retired and all of a sudden it just seemed like...

Amy Life caught up.

Connie Yeah. My kids kept telling me I need to go back to work.

Amy They want more inheritance. Yeah, that's what that's about [Laughter].

Catherine And like Pat said, it's the physical thing that affects you mentally. But if we can get out, if we can get dressed and we can drive to the Taco time, that in itself and knowing that we're going to laugh and we can laugh at each other, we can make fun of each other and we're still friends when it's over and we know that we can call on anyone. It also helps to know that everybody's gonna forget everything we said before they get to the car. [Laughter]

Pat The car? The door [Laughter]

Catherine So the no judging and yeah, we discuss our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren. We have a need to be in their lives. And we accept each other as we are. We don't have to be someone we're or not. We don't judge our haircuts or our style of dressing or so, anyway, this is a good group, and it's good therapy.

Amy It is. And everybody should have this. Like, everybody needs this.

Pat But very few people do yeah.

Amy Why do you think that is?

Pat I think because they're afraid of being judged when they get in a group like this. I really think that if people aren't friends other than I mean, family is so

important but that you need somebody where you can go and express stuff to them about your family that you don't like and that you can't say to your family and you know that it's going to be OK, which helps you get rid of that. Well, it's a stress. And so you just you feel like, gee, I know I can go and talk to them about this today and breathe a sigh of relief and you got it off your chest and that they put their input into it, whether it's good or bad or not. You don't have to take their advice if you don't want do. But, yet a lot of times it will really help you, instead of sitting in stewing about something, you really have a sounding board.

Amy Yeah. There's a lot of research that talks about just being able to talk, just how that just lightens your anxiety and your stress, just talking about it.

Catherine And on the other end of that, spectrum, we delight in each other's grandchildren's achievements. Yeah, we love to brag about our kids and our grandkids and who's made the football team and who's in the school play and who just graduated from college and whoever. We love each other's children.

Pat And it's genuine.

Catherine It's very genuine. And we've raised our children together and we're as happy for each other as possible.

Connie And because of our age, we have a different perspective on life. And, you know, our surroundings and things like that. Our lives have changed because of our age, because our children are now grown, their children are grown. And so all the family get together that you used to have when your own children were at home, I mean, like when my kids were little, we would have, you know, like Easter egg hunts, and the different holidays we always did stuff together and then the extended family would be there. Well, as your family close that kind of sometimes diminishes. And even after my kids got married, we still had Sunday dinner every Sunday. We would have birthday dinners and, you know, stuff like that, get together. When my grandkids were little we still had the Easter egg hunts. The leprechaun would come on St. Patrick's, you know, the kids would sleep over. Well, now the grandkids are grown, and most of them, they've got kids. And as our families grow and expand, I want to say we're not we're not pushed aside. But yet, in some ways, we are. We are kind of...we are. We're kind of pushed aside, you know, I mean, I used to go camping all the time with my kids and my grandkids. Well, now my grandkids, you know, I don't want to go with grandma. And so you know, and my kids do that stuff by themselves. And once in a while, I can go. I can go any time I want to ask to go. But I'm not going to do that. But so we have to have something outside. I mean, our families, like Pat said, are very important. They're very precious. To us, and we still do things with them. But it's....it's just different. So we have to have something to replace that void that is there that used to be there. And this is where we are. This group fills that void.

Amy This is the lunch bunch.

Connie Yep, we are.

Amy So I love everything you just said because I do know you think about, you have a family and your whole world revolves around your family. And then your family has a family and their whole world becomes their family. So that's got to be again, we talked about this before we started. We started talking about the little losses that you guys have all the time. Like you've talked about the physical losses that you had challenges with.

But I've also heard some really great things. Like one thing, that absolutely I'm hearing is key is that you have a social connection not just with your family, but outside your family. But also that you find the little joys in life like puzzles and solving games.

Catherine And not falling down. [Laughter]

Amy And not falling down. So but also, it sounds like you find it is kind of a different perspective, too, because it's like, is this really going to matter? So I when I worked in hospice all those years, I remember sitting with the people who were passing away or you know, at the end of their lives. And the things that they would talk to me about were never like, I wish I had

Pat Dusted more often.

Amy Yeah. Dusted more often or I wish I had gone here or gone there or whatever the things that they talked about and things that they had regrets about were lack of connection was always I wish I had done more with my grandson or I wish I had you know, I wish we had done this. And it was never it was never even about money, which everybody seems to be, you know, everything's money. So you guys, what my generation can learn from you and every generation and months and years to focus on what's important, right? So that you've got a different perspective. So maybe you don't sweat that your roots are showing.

Pat And we're just glad we still have roots. [Laughter]

Amy Just glad you have hair. [Laughter]

Connie Yeah. Mine fell out and it's just coming back and some of it hasn't. [Laughter]

Amy So I just think that's pretty neat. That's pretty special. If we could all live like that though, you know, where we just didn't...

Catherine And the money thing when you mentioned that, none of us are rolling in money. No, we all have to watch what we spend. So we found that it's not, it's not that important as important as it was for the younger, we just make certain to live within our budget if you need a taco instead of a steak and be just as happy. [Laughter]

Pat It really isn't about the food.

Amy It's about the company.

Pat Yeah, it really is. I mean, like Cathy said, we can go someplace. One person just absolutely does not want to be there, but you can always find something, you know? But it's not about the food. It's about being together. And my whole family knows don't bother Grandma on Wednesday because she ain't going to answer your phone and she ain't gonna be there. So and even Roger, well, my husband will say, well, today's Wednesday. Yep. And telling me, yeah, don't make appointments that I need to be do because I'm not going to be there. These people are more important than your dying. [Laughter]

Amy Cuz they're going to be here after you die.

Connie So yeah, don't die on Wednesday. [Laughter]

Pat Yeah, that's right, or you're all by yourself. [Laughter]

So that I think really day to have all those outlets, if you sat at home the whole time, you know, and my mom did this she was very confined. It affected her mentally and she lived to 90, but mentally to watch her go downhill because she wouldn't go out for a ride. She wouldn't have people come over and then when she did, she was very into dementia that she thought they were stealing from her. So she would go back and I watched her deteriorate mentally because of how confined she was in her own mind. That she couldn't go and do these things. She actually could have if she would have wanted to. But there was an effort she had to put forth that she didn't want to do anymore. And I think if you don't keep active mentally, you're going to go down a lot faster than physically, and that's just my own thoughts.

Amy I think you're probably right. I do. I think your mind is absolutely connected with your body. And if you're depressed or isolating or whatever, you're not going to move. You're not going to do anything. You're not going to seek connections. You're not going to go out.

Catherine Well, we have learned to laugh at ourselves, laugh at each other

Connie So much we've cried. [Laughter]

Pat Yeah, I think because of these small little things, it helps you get over big things and really it's the little things that irritate me, not the big things.

Amy You guys just love each other. That's all it is. You just love each other. You accept each other.

Pat There is probably more love in that group than in most families, you know?
[Laughter]

Catherin Well, there's total trust.

Pat Yeah, there is. There is.

Catherine Well, there's very little in life that someone hasn't gone through. We've gone through happiness, we've gone through death. We've gone through sorrows, we've gone through prison, we've gone through drugs, alcoholism,

Connie Surgery

Catherine Surgery, yeah all kinds of surgery. Children that excel and children with learning disabilities. There's really nothing we haven't gone through. We've gone through gay and lesbian relationships, divorce, happy marriages, miserable marriages, no marriages. [Laughter] There's just nothing. And we've talked about this. There's not one thing that we can think of in life that one of us haven't gone through.

Amy Yeah. And that you wouldn't be there for each other.

Catherine If we could get there, if we didn't stumble fall.

Connie Wat I like about the group, too, I mean, when we're in the group like we've talked about, we can talk about anything and everything and our comfortable and I mean, like I said, somebody has already gone through that and we can talk to it there. But one on one with these two, that meant so much to me these last few months, because it's just they both pretty much came to me and said, Connie, what's going on? Nothing's been really said. And it isn't because I don't trust them all. It's just some things you just can't. But these two I have been able to

Amy Well, I'm really grateful you guys are my mom's friends and I know how much she loves you and cares about both of you and all of you. And I love knowing that she has you guys. It's like everybody needs a golden girl, golden group. Everybody needs what you guys have.

Pat I wish more people had what we have. Yeah, I really do. But I don't know how they go about doing it, because in this day and age, what I see is people are so

judgmental, you know? I mean, we even talk politics and nobody kills the other person. [Laughter]

Amy And that's an impressive you know?

Pat Well, and we're honest with each other, it helps. You know, there is no facade. There's no trying to be better than one or the other. We're just who we are. And I think that helps everybody in that group.

Catherine We've had some serious challenges, but it doesn't interfere with Wednesday.

Amy It's healthy. It's your it's your it's your mental health. It's your it's your self-care day.

Catherine Yay! Well, we better go eat. [Laughter]

[Soft Music]

Amy I hope you enjoyed listening to my mom and her friends in this interview I had with them. I felt really special, just being included in the room with these ladies.

If you are lonely, please consider making time to connect. It can be hard to stretch outside your comfort zone, but the benefits of having support and feeling connected to others are far greater than you may think.

If you're struggling consider joining a new club or a group or investing in a new hobby, reach out to an old friend or volunteer or just introduce yourself to your neighbors. Put yourself out there. If you need more support, consider calling 211 to find local groups or community resources. And if you or someone in your household would like additional resources or support consider calling your Employee Assistance Program. There may be lots of options available to you through that resource. The important part here is to reach out.

For 50 years, my mom has been lucky enough to have a group of women in her corner and she's been in theirs. They've raised their children together. They've traveled every road. Marriages, divorces, job loss health, illness, and deaths of loved ones side by side in support. And as I'm sure you heard, they laugh and joke and play. I felt honored to have this time with them, and I hope you felt a connection with them too. But I hope you have your own group or that it makes you want your own lunch bunch or a golden group. Because we all need people in our corner.

Until next time, thanks for joining me on the Think Tank podcast.

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