

# 2016 AARP Social Engagement and Brain Health Survey

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AARP Research

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**Research**

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The views expressed herein are for information, debate, and discussion, and do not necessarily represent official policies of AARP.

## **Acknowledgments**

GfK conducted this survey for AARP using its nationally representative online panel, Knowledge Panel. This report was prepared by Laura Mehegan, Chuck Rainville & Laura Skufca in AARP Research. For additional information about the survey, contact Laura Mehegan at [lemehegan@aarp.org](mailto:lemehegan@aarp.org). Media inquiries should be directed to Greg Phillips at [gphillips@aarp.org](mailto:gphillips@aarp.org).

# Objectives

- To characterize social engagement, isolation and loneliness, and social network size among 40+ adults.
- To understand factors that influence social engagement, isolation, and loneliness.
- To examine the relationship between social engagement, isolation, and loneliness and brain health, physical health, and mental well-being.

# Methodology

- An online survey fielded December 8 – December 26, 2016 among a nationally representative sample of 2,585 Americans age 40+.
- Additional interviews were conducted to achieve the following samples:
  - 512 Hispanic/Latinos age 40+ (conducted in both English and Spanish)
  - 505 African Americans age 40+
  - 353 Asian Americans age 40+.
- The data were weighted by age, gender, race, ethnicity, employment status and income.
- All estimates are for the general 40+ US population unless otherwise noted.
- The margin of error for the national sample of 2,585 adults age 40+ is +/- 2.7%. The margin of error among subgroups (e.g., age cohorts) is higher.
- Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

# Key Findings

## Social Engagement Typology

- Based on social network size, social group involvement, and satisfaction with social connectedness, four social types emerged to characterize 40+ adults: The Highly-Connected, the People-People, the Givers, and the Socially-Disconnected.
- One in five 40+ adults are “Socially-Disconnected.” They have small social networks, a low-level of social group involvement, are dissatisfied with their social connectedness, and have below-average mental well-being scores. This group is most in need of suggestions on how to improve their level of engagement.

## Social Network Size

- The average social network size among 40+ adults is 19 family members and friends. Women tend to have larger networks overall and those age 60+ tend to have more friends. 40+ adults with larger social networks rate their brain health higher.
- Two major life events affect social network sizes among the older age cohorts. As people *retire*, overall network size increases through the addition of new friends to the network. As family networks contract (often with the *loss of spouse/partners*), social networks return to their pre-retirement size. These life events do not negatively affect well-being or reported satisfaction with relationships.
- Most 40+ adults, particularly those older than age 60, are happy with their relationships.

## Loneliness and Isolation

- Many 40+ adults say they sometimes or often lack companionship (37%), find it hard to engage socially (35%), and feel isolated from others (29%). This is particularly true for adults without a spouse/partner and for those aged 50-59. In fact, adults who experience loneliness and isolation have significantly smaller social networks and lower mental well-being scores.

# Key Findings (continued)

- Those who rarely lack companionship, have difficulty engaging socially, or feel isolated from others are more likely to self-report their overall health and brain health as excellent/very good.
- More than half of 40+ adults own a pet. While most pet-owners say their pet offers them companionship, dog owners feel more strongly about this than cat owners. More women than men say they would be lonely without their pet.

## **Social Engagement**

- Adults who are dissatisfied with their level of social engagement are significantly more likely to report a decrease in their cognitive functioning in the previous five years.
- When asked how easy or difficult their communities make it for them to be socially engaged, most 40+ adults said their communities make it easy. However, adults who say their communities make it very difficult have significantly smaller social networks compared to those whose communities make it very easy.
- Adults say their social relationships encourage them to try new things and take better care of their health. Significantly more African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos say this is true to a great extent.
- African Americans/Blacks are more likely to attend religious services and to engage in spiritual and religious group activities compared to the general population. They are also much more likely to engage in prayer multiple times per day outside of religious services.
- Having a purpose in life is important to nearly all 40+ adults. Those who consider this to be important have larger social networks and higher average mental well-being scores compared to those who think it is unimportant.

# Social Engagement Typology

Four types of socially engaged 40+ adults were characterized in the population. The “Highly-Connected” and “People-People” have the highest median age and the highest average mental well-being (MWB) scores and comprise nearly six in 10 (59%) of all 40+ adults.\* One in five (19%) 40+ adults are “Socially-Disconnected” representing an opportunity for intervention.

**Social Engagement Typology= Size of social network, level of social group involvement, and satisfaction with level of social connectedness.**

The Highly-Connected

- 28% of population
- Median age=61
- Avg. MWB=53.7

- Large network
- High social group involvement
- High satisfaction with connectedness

The People-People

- 31% of population
- Median age=58
- Avg. MWB=52.9

- Large network
- Low social group involvement
- High satisfaction with connectedness

The Givers

- 22% of population
- Median age=56
- Avg. MWB=47.1

- Small network
- High social group involvement (as a way to serve, not socialize)
- Low to medium satisfaction with connectedness

The Socially-Disconnected

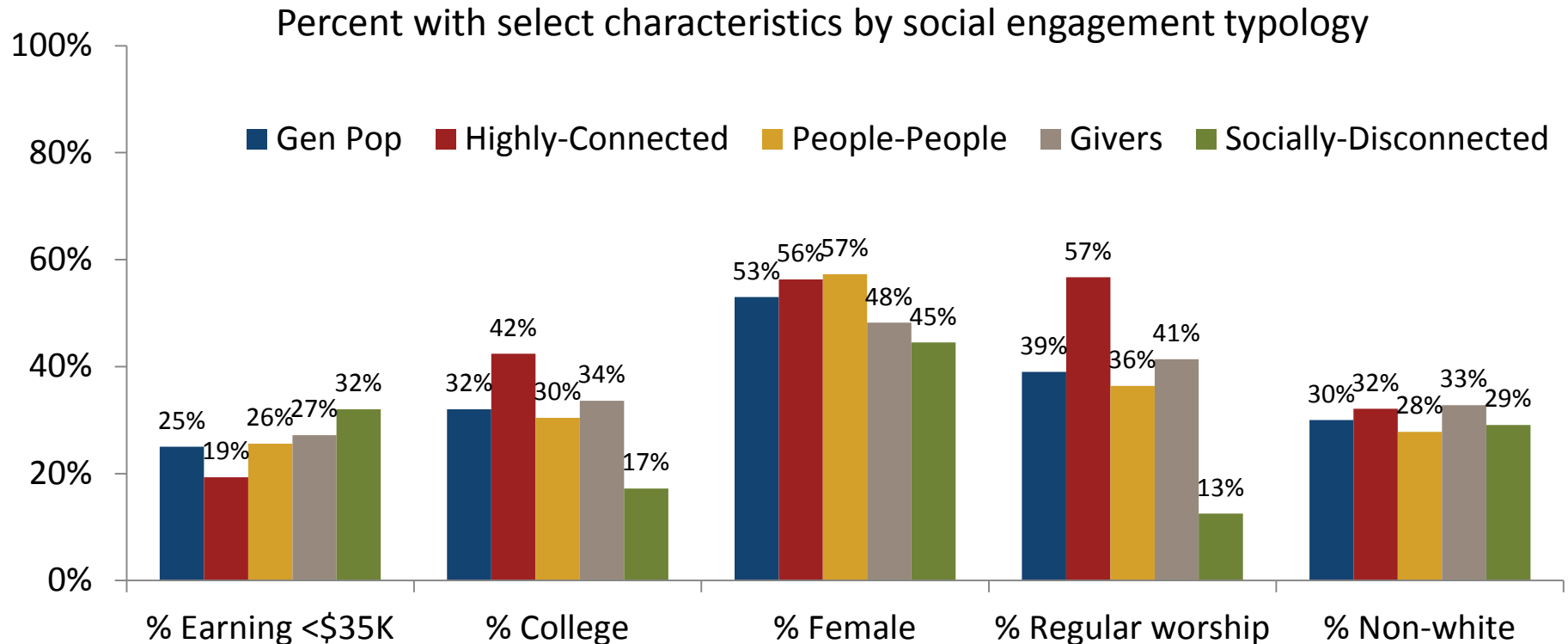
- 19% of population
- Median age=56
- Avg. MWB=45.8

- Small network
- Low social group involvement
- Low satisfaction with connectedness

\*Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) © NHS Health Scotland, University of Warwick and University of Edinburgh, 2006, all rights reserved. This scale is based on 14-items each measured on a 5-point scale. Total scores range from 14 to 70. The average, overall mental well-being score is 50.5.

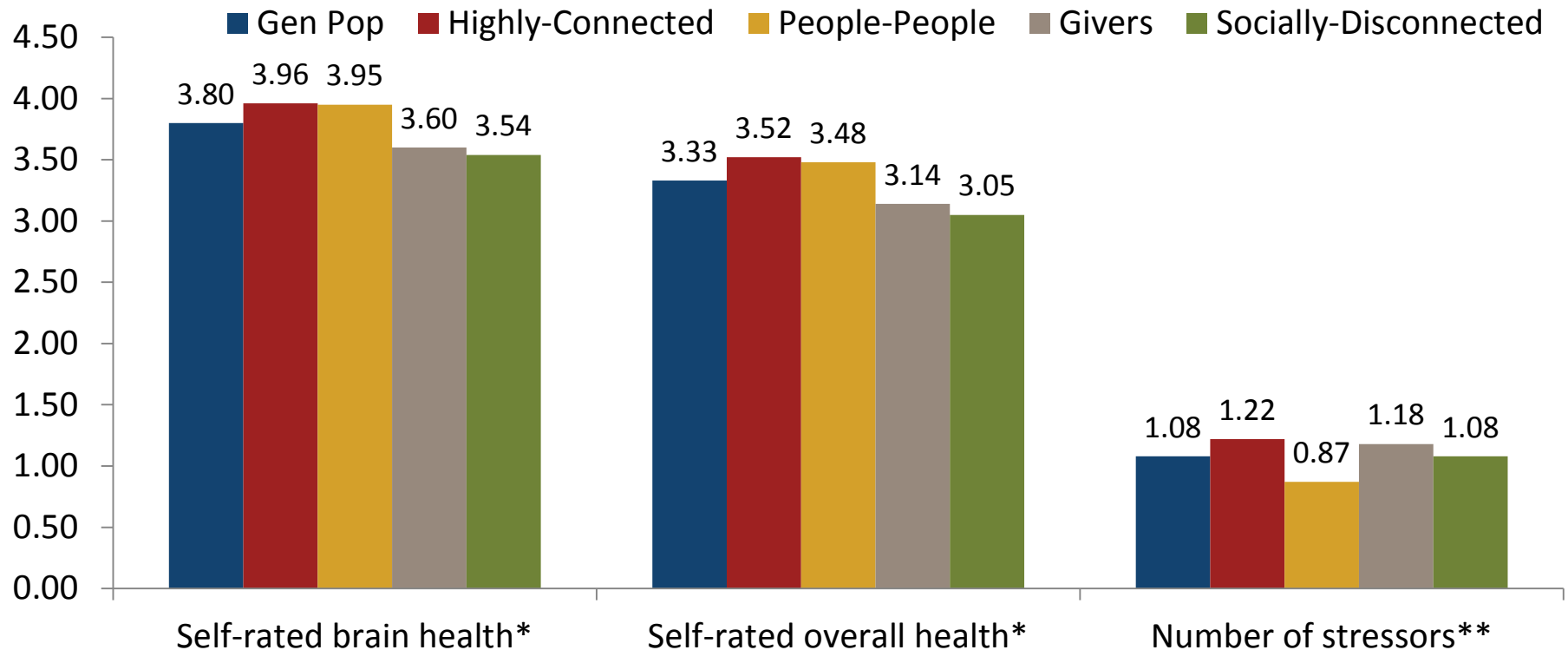


The “Highly-Connected” are the most likely to be high-income earners, college graduates, regular worshipers, and racially/ethnically diverse. The “Socially-Disconnected” have the opposite characteristics.



The “Highly-Connected” and the “People-People” rate their brain health and overall health higher. Interestingly, the “Highly-Connected” experience above-average life stressors and “People-People” experience below-average life stressors.

Average self-rated brain health, self-rated overall health and number of stressors by social engagement typology

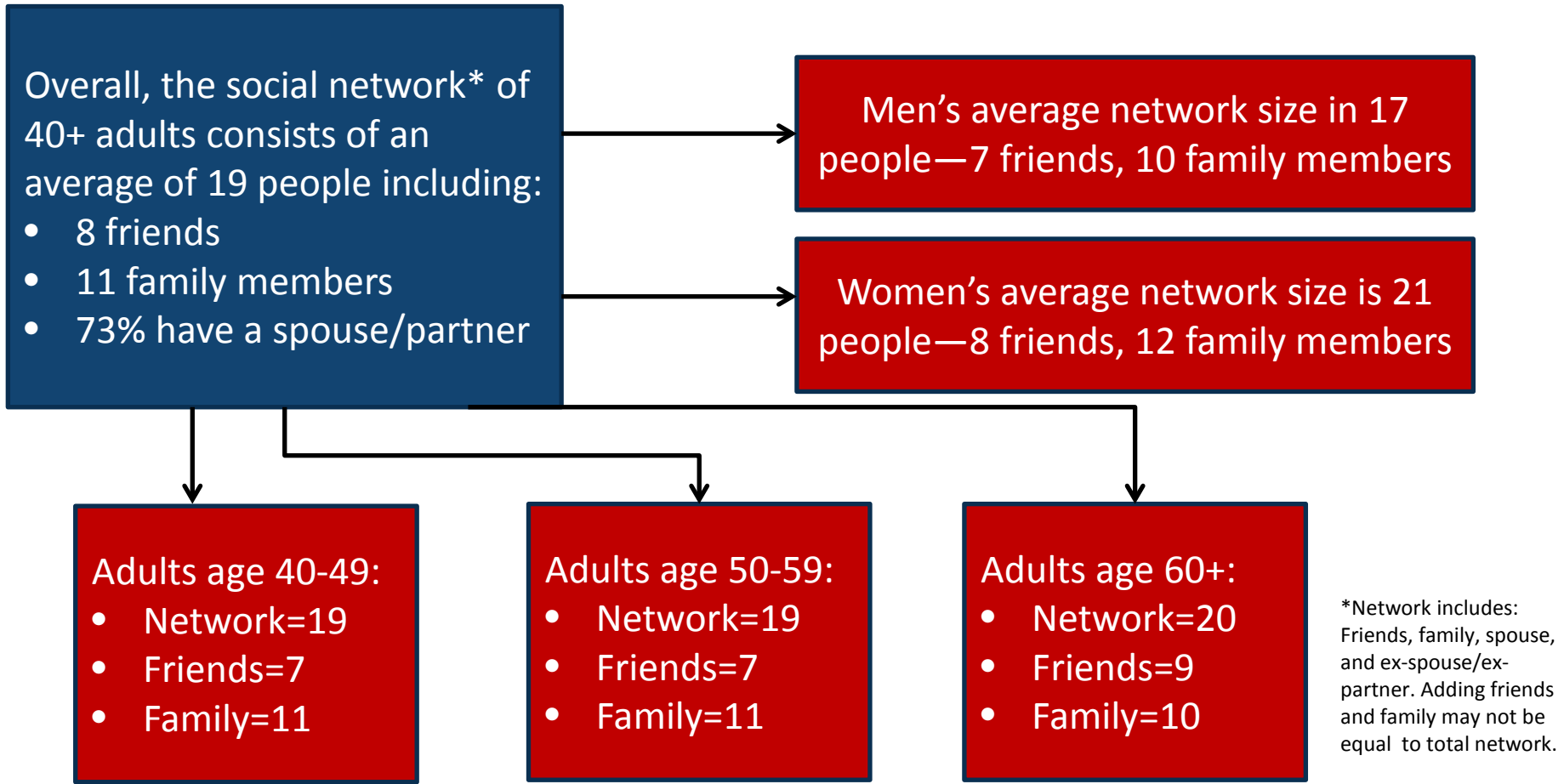


\*Scale 1 to 5, with 5 being “excellent” brain health and overall health.

\*\*From a checklist of 9 potential life event stressors.

# Social Network

Adults age 40+ average 19 people in their social network. Women tend to have larger social networks than men. A major life transition- retirement (generally observed after age 60)- tends to expand social networks through the addition of new friendships. Often with the loss of a spouse/partner (generally observed after age 74), networks return to their original average size (19 people). No decrease in well-being or satisfaction with relationships are found in later life.



40+ adults are close to people they interact with on a regular basis, such as their religious leader and their neighbor. In previous generations, adults may have been close to people like their mail carriers and barbers, but this is not the case today.

40+ adults are close to their:

- Religious leader
- Neighbor
- Coworker
- Supervisor
- Healthcare provider

More 40+ adults are not close to their:

- Mail carrier
- Hair stylist/barber
- Financial advisor

Very few of this type of person are in 40+ adults lives:

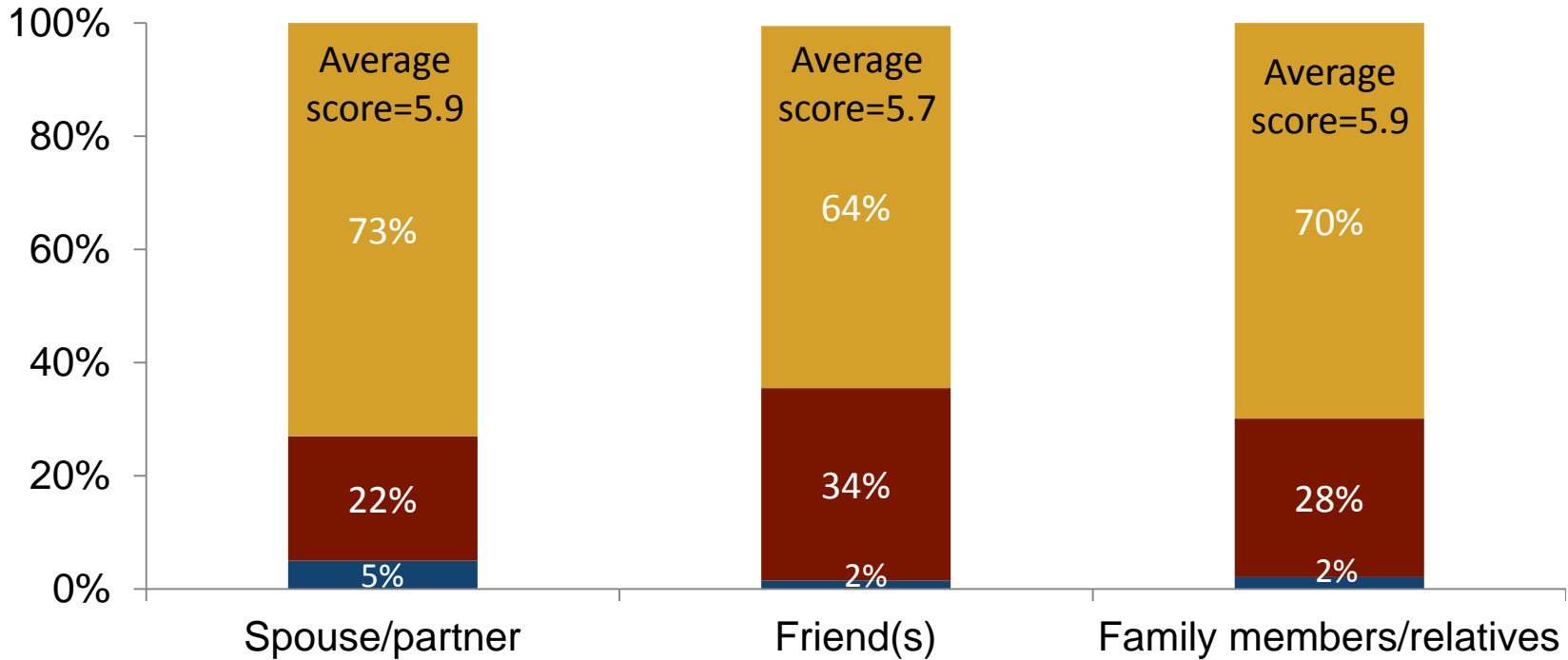
- Counselor/therapist
- Exercise leader/coach
- Teacher
- Mentor
- Lawyer

How close do you feel your relationship is with your...?

Most 40+ adults are happy with their relationships. More of the 40+ are happy with their family relations (spouse/partners and family/relatives) than with their friends. That said, about two-thirds of the 40+ population are happy with their friend relationships.

How would you rate your relationship with your...

■ Unhappy (1,2) ■ Neutral (3,4,5) ■ Happy (6,7)



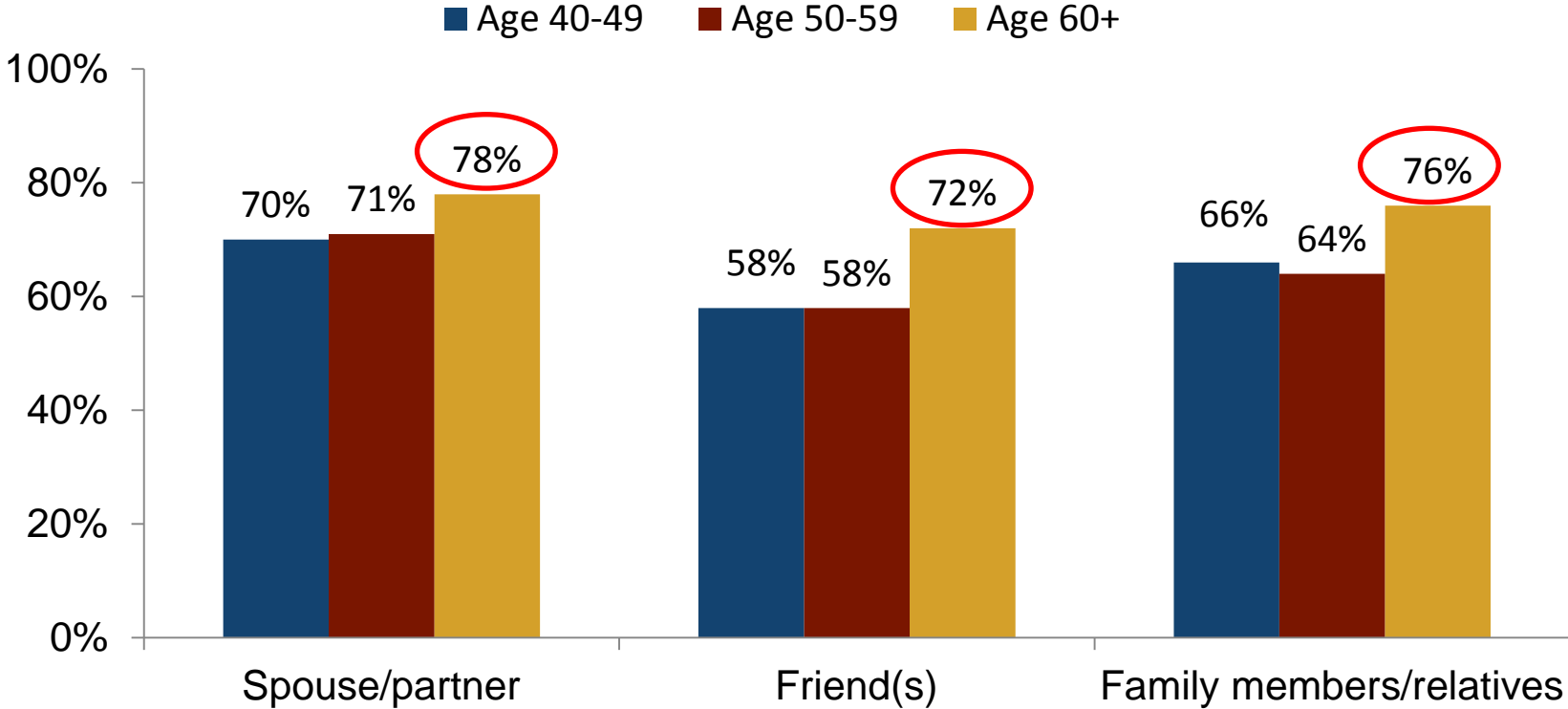
-Taking all things together, how would you rate your relationship with your spouse/partner on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy?

-Overall, how would you rate your relationship with your friend(s) on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy?

-Overall, how would you rate your relationship with family members and relatives on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy?

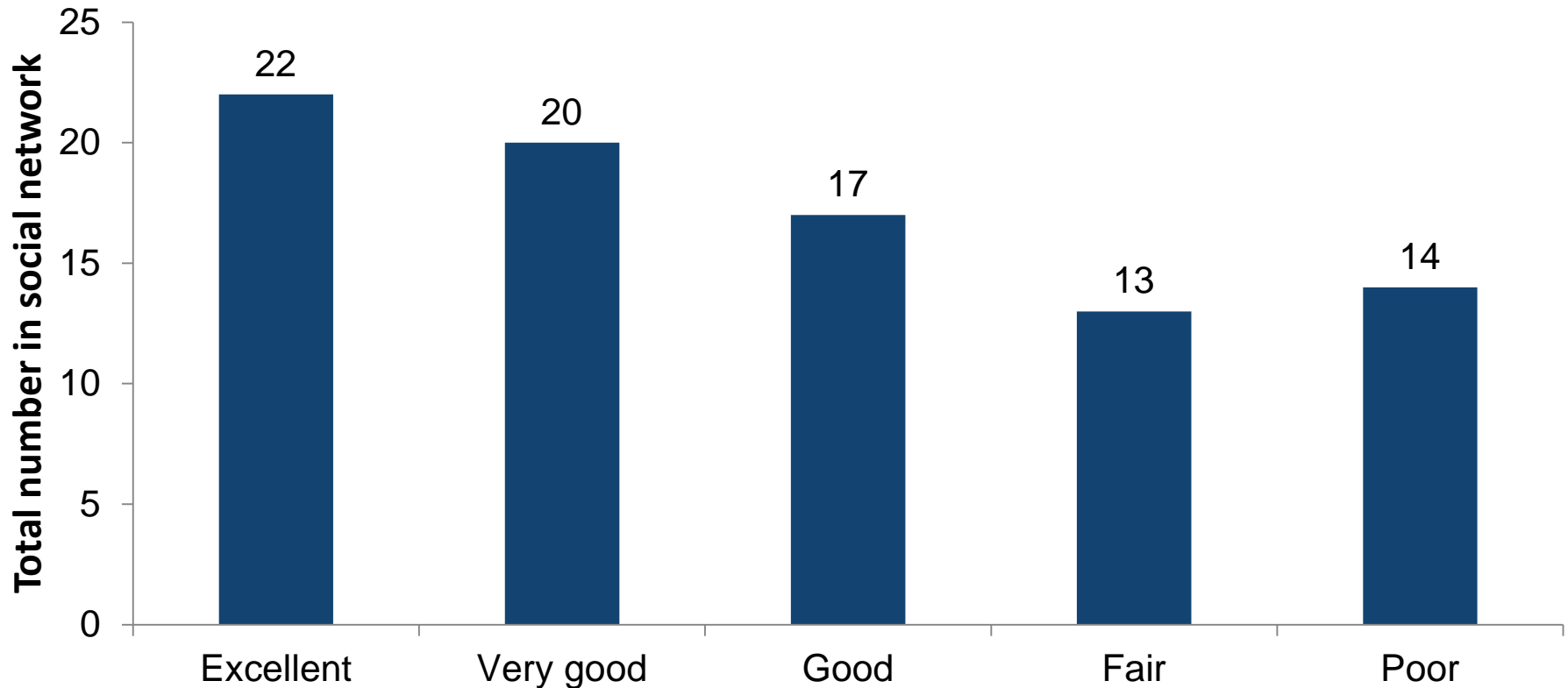
Adults age 60 and older tend to be happier with their relationships compared to adults aged 40 to 59.

Percent who say they are happy with their relationships, by age



-Taking all things together, how would you rate your relationship with your spouse/partner on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy?  
-Overall, how would you rate your relationship with your friend(s) on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy?  
-Overall, how would you rate your relationship with family members and relatives on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy?

40+ adults with larger social networks self-rate their brain health higher.



-Getting more specific, would you say that your brain health or mental sharpness is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?



# Social Isolation and Loneliness

About three in 10 (29%) or more 40+ adults feel isolated, have difficulty engaging socially (35%), or lack companionship (37%) at least some of the time. Adults age 50-59 are more likely to feel this way as are adults without a spouse/partner.

## How often do you....

### Percent some of the time/often:

- Women (42%) vs. men (31%)
- No spouse/partner (59%) vs. spouse/partner (28%)
- Age 50-59 (41%) vs. 40-49 (36%) and 60+ (34%)\*

- No spouse/partner (43%) vs. spouse/partner (32%)
- Age 50-59 (44%) vs. 40-49 (35%) and 60+ (30%)

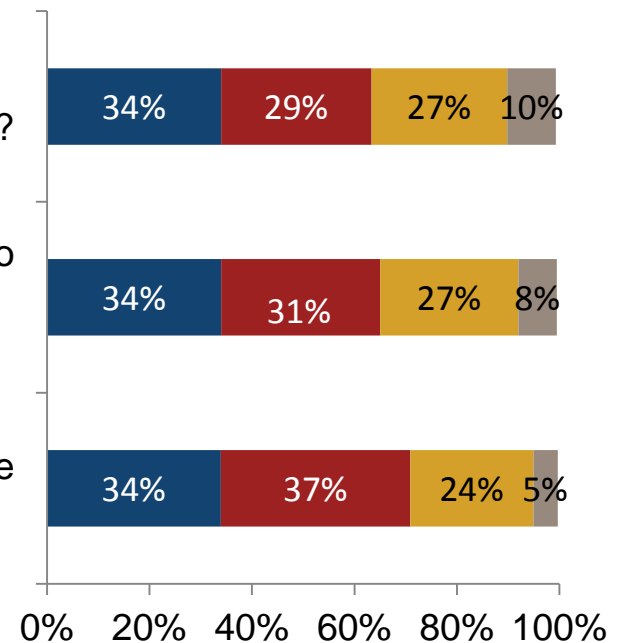
- No spouse/partner (39%) vs. spouse/partner (24%)
- Age 50-59 (34%) vs. 40-49 (28%) and 60+ (25%)

Feel you lack companionship?

Feel it is hard for you to engage socially with others?

Feel isolated from the people around you?

■ Never ■ Hardly ever ■ Some of the time ■ Often



\*Results not statistically significant.

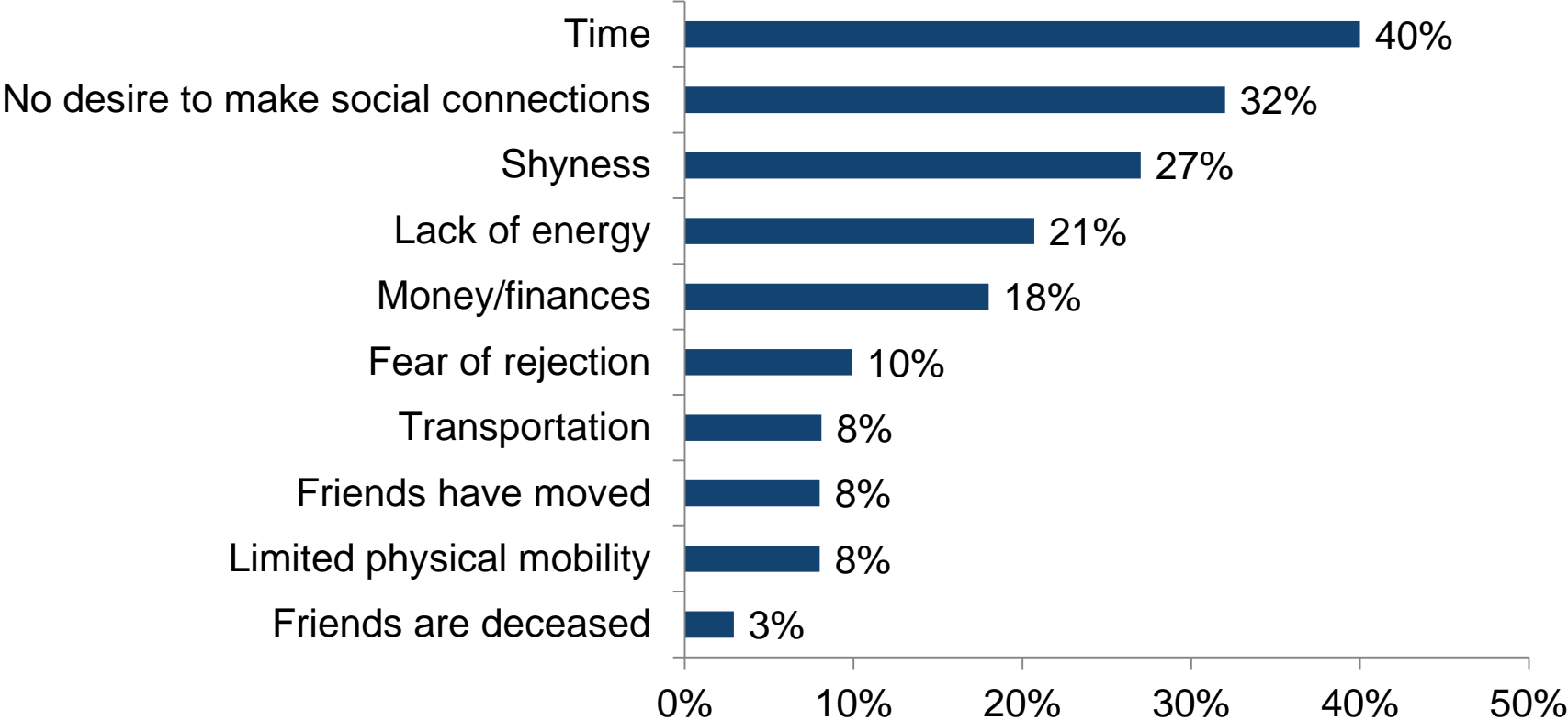
How often do you feel you lack companionship?

How often, if at all, is it hard for you to engage socially with others?

How often do you feel isolated from the people around you?

Among those who say it is hard to engage with others, the most common reasons are: time, lack of desire to make social connections, and shyness.

### Reasons it is hard for some adults to engage with others



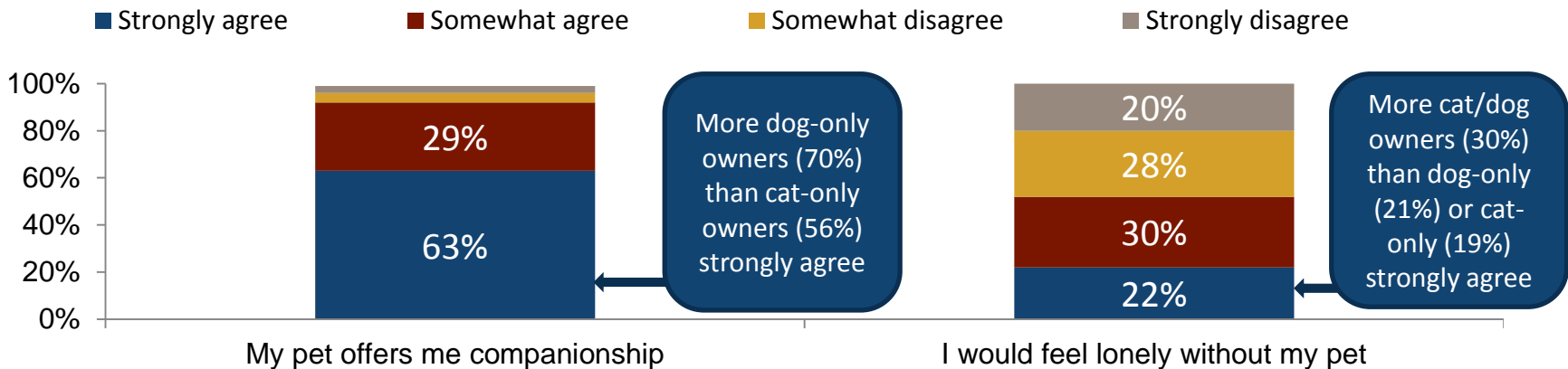
Which of the following are reasons why it is hard for you to engage socially with others? (Asked of respondents who did not say NEVER when asked “How often, if at all, is it hard for you to engage socially with others?” (N=1,017)

40+ adults who lack companionship, feel it is hard to engage socially and feel isolated have much smaller social networks.

| Isolation/Loneliness   | Frequency        | Average Social Network Size (N) |         |        |
|--|------------------|---------------------------------|---------|--------|
|  |                  | Total*                          | Friends | Family |
| How often do you feel you lack companionship?                | Never            | 22                              | 8       | 12     |
|  | Hardly ever      | 20                              | 8       | 11     |
|  | Some of the time | 18                              | 7       | 10     |
|  | Often            | 14                              | 5       | 8      |
| How often is it hard for you to engage socially with others? | Never            | 22                              | 9       | 12     |
|  | Hardly ever      | 21                              | 8       | 11     |
|  | Some of the time | 16                              | 6       | 9      |
|  | Often            | 14                              | 4       | 9      |
| How often do you feel isolated from the people around you?   | Never            | 21                              | 8       | 11     |
|  | Hardly ever      | 21                              | 8       | 11     |
|  | Some of the time | 17                              | 6       | 10     |
|  | Often            | 14                              | 4       | 9      |

\*Network includes: Friends, family, spouse, and ex-spouse/ex-partner. Adding friends and family may not be equal to total network.

Over half (56%) of 40+ adults have a pet but significantly fewer African Americans/Blacks (29%) and Asians (34%) have pets compared to the general population. Adults over 60 (49%) are less likely to have a pet than those age 40-49 (60%) or 50-59 (63%). More women (60%) than men (42%) agree they would be lonely without their pet.



-Do you have any pets?

-What type of pet do you have? (dog, cat, other)

- Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement? (a) My pet offers me companionship. (b) Without the companionship of my pet, I would feel lonely.

# Social Engagement

A majority of 40+ adults share meals in the household, talk on the phone, and interact with their neighbors once a month or more. Adults 60+ are significantly more likely than adults 40-59 to have a phone conversation with friends/relatives and talk with their neighbors, emphasizing the importance of connecting by phone and the importance of neighbors as we age.

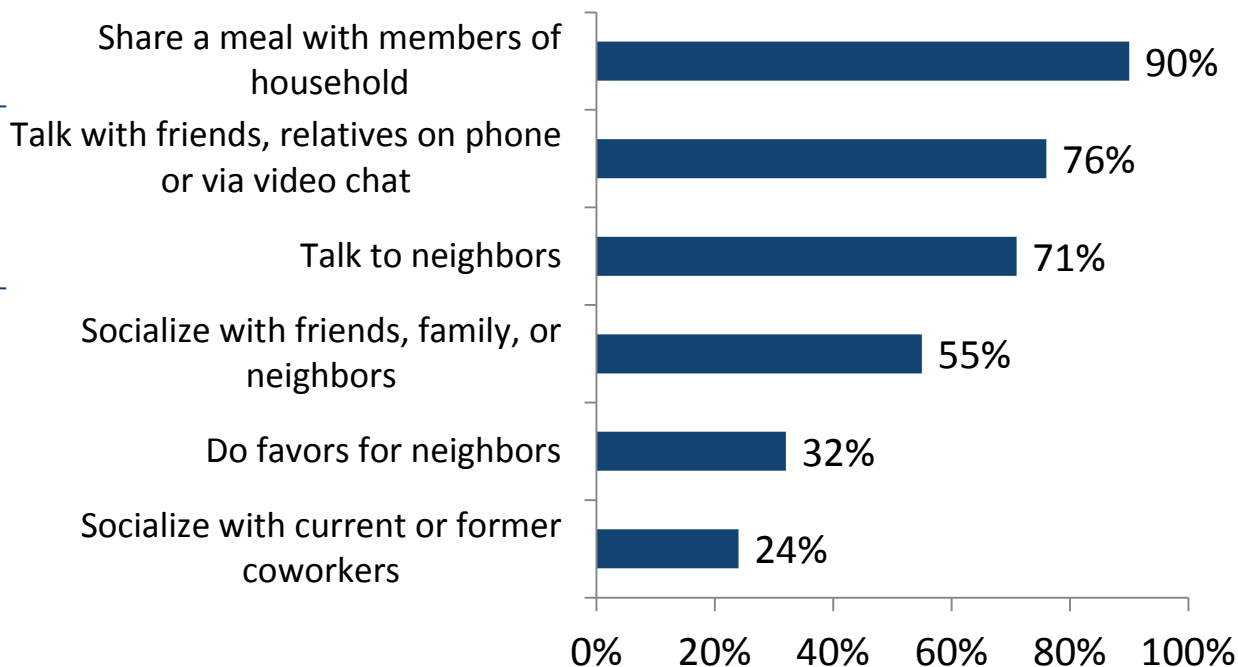
Adults age 60+ are significantly more likely to talk on the phone or video chat monthly or more:

- 40-49 – 73%
- 50-59 – 72%
- 60+ – 81%

...And talk to their neighbors:

- 40-49 – 65%
- 50-59 – 68%
- 60+ – 78%

Percent who participated in these activities once a month or more often, in the last 12 months

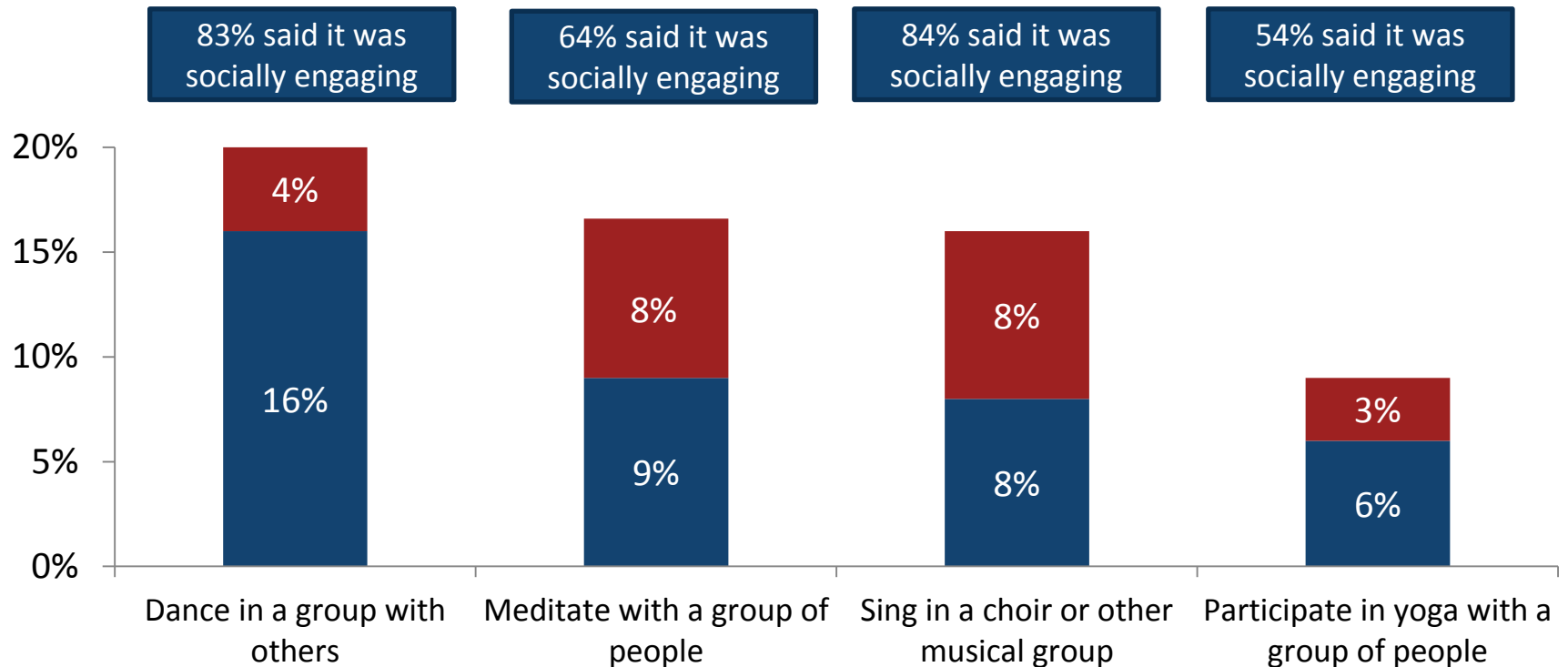


In the past 12 months, how often did you...? (a) Get together socially with friends, relatives, or neighbors. (b) Get together socially with current or former coworkers outside or work-related gatherings. (c) Share a meal with members of your household. (d) Talk to your neighbors. (e) Do favors for you neighbors. (f) Talk with your friends or relatives on the telephone or by video call.

Few 40+ adults dance in a group or sing in a choir but over eight in 10 who do, say it is socially engaging. Hispanics/Latinos compared to the gen pop (37% vs. 20%) are significantly more likely to dance in a group with others (at all) and meditate (30% vs. 17%).

In the last 12 months, how often did you....

■ Infrequently (Several times per year to less than once a year) ■ Frequently (once a month or more)



-In the past 12 months, how often did you...? (b) Participate in yoga with a group of people. (c) Meditate with a group of people. (e) Sing in a choir or other musical group. (f) Dance in a group with others.

-How socially-engaging do you find this activity? (Not at all, not very, somewhat, very)



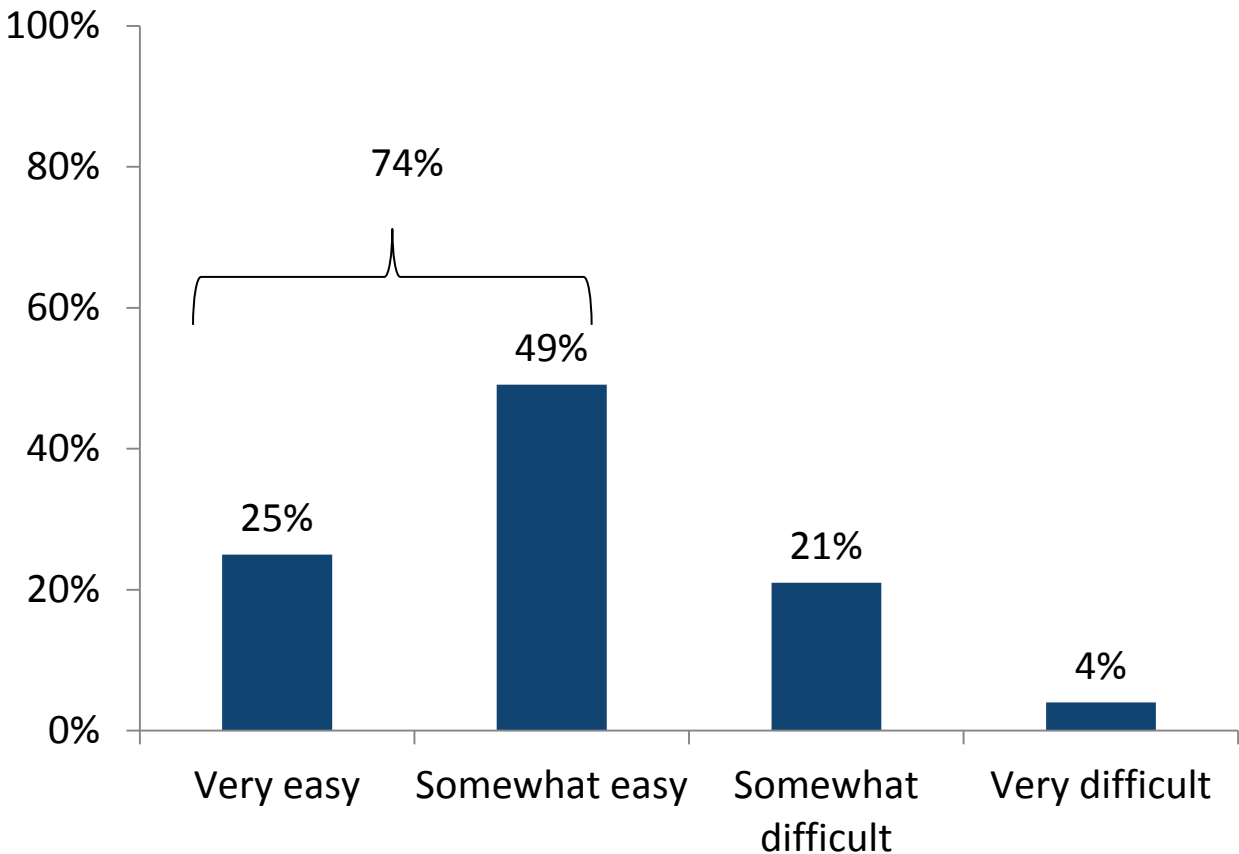
Religious and charitable organizations have the highest level of frequent participation. The majority feel their participation in various organizations is socially engaging.

| Organization Type        | Frequency of Participation |              |       | % saying their participation is Socially Engaging |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|-------|---|
|                          | Frequently                 | Infrequently | Never |   |
| Religious                | 23%                        | 23%          | 52%   | 85%   |
| Charitable               | 12%                        | 33%          | 54%   | 80%   |
| Social club              | 11%                        | 10%          | 78%   | 80%   |
| Service organization     | 10%                        | 18%          | 70%   | 81%   |
| Educational              | 9%                         | 22%          | 67%   | 77%   |
| Health-related           | 8%                         | 19%          | 72%   | 65%   |
| Sports club              | 7%                         | 11%          | 82%   | 80%   |
| Neighborhood association | 6%                         | 20%          | 73%   | 73%   |
| Civic                    | 6%                         | 20%          | 72%   | 68%   |
| Support group            | 5%                         | 13%          | 81%   | 69%   |
| Political                | 4%                         | 15%          | 79%   | 67%   |
| Environmental            | 4%                         | 16%          | 79%   | 66%   |
| Animal Welfare           | 3%                         | 16%          | 80%   | 70%   |
| Veterans Group           | 3%                         | 10%          | 86%   | 69%   |

Most (74%) 40+ adults say their community makes it easy to be socially engaged, but those who say it is difficult have significantly smaller social networks; suggesting the importance of community design in social engagement.



**16 vs. 22**  
 The social network size for people who say their community makes it very difficult for them to be socially engaged compared to those who say it makes social engagement very easy



-How easy or difficult does your community make it for you to be socially engaged?

Three in 10 40+ adults say their social engagement has increased in the last five years. Those who have seen an increase also have an above average social network size and mental well-being score. The one-quarter of adults who have seen a decrease, however, have below average networks and mental well-being scores.

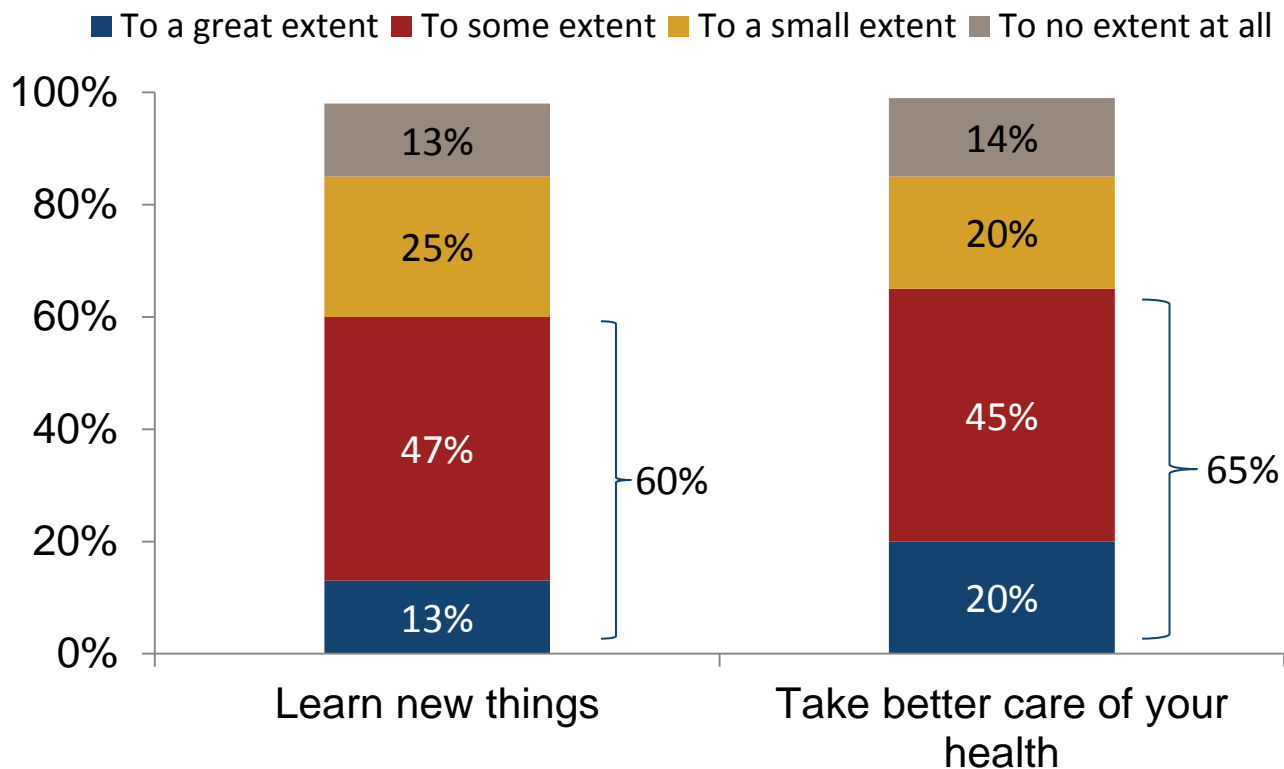
| Change in level of social engagement in last five years | %   | Average size of social network | Average mental well-being score |
|---|-----|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Increased a lot   | 7%  | 28                             | 55.7                            |
| Increased a little                                      | 23% | 22                             | 53.1                            |
| Stayed the same   | 44% | 18                             | 51.5                            |
| Decreased a little                                      | 16% | 17                             | 48.6                            |
| Decreased a lot   | 9%  | 15                             | 41.0                            |

-Has your level of social engagement increased, decreased, or stayed the same within the last five years?

Six in 10 or more 40+ adults say they are encouraged to learn new things and take better care of their health due to their social relationships. More African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos are encouraged “to a great extent” compared to the general population.

African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos are significantly more likely than the general population to say their social relationships encourage them “to a great extent” to learn new things (23% each vs. 13%) and take better care of their health (37%, 33% vs 20%).

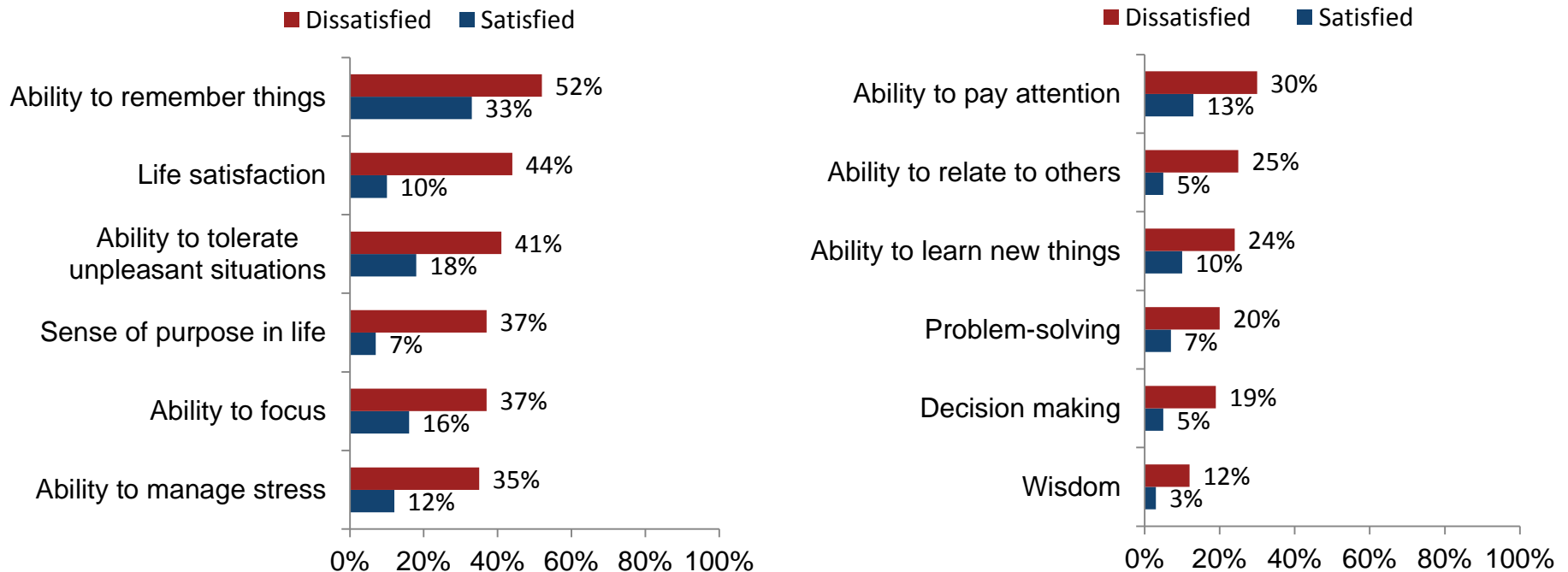
### To what extent do your social relationships encourage you to...



- To what extent do your social relationships encourage you to learn new things?
- To what extent do your social relationships encourage you to take better care of your health?

Significantly more 40+ adults who are dissatisfied with their level of social engagement say their cognitive abilities have decreased in the last five years. Over half (52%) say their ability to remember things has decreased.

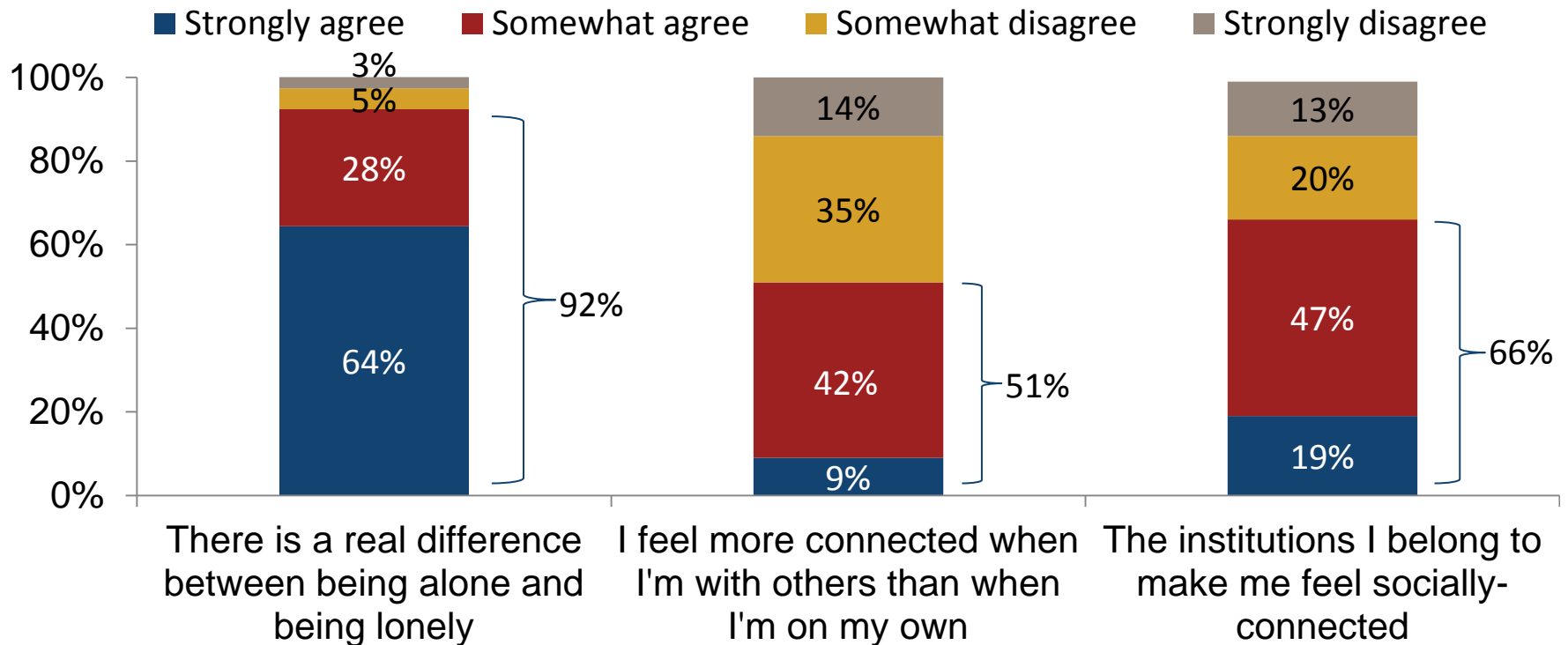
Percent who say cognitive characteristics have decreased in the last five years by satisfaction with level of social engagement



-In the past five years, has the following increased, stayed the same, or decreased. Is that a little or a lot?

-In general, how satisfied are you, if at all, with the degree to which you engage socially?

Two-thirds (66%) of 40+ adults say their social groups make them feel connected. Adults age 60+ (72%) are more likely to feel this way compared to those aged 40-49 (59%) and 50-59 (63%). The same is true for women compared to men (69% vs. 62%).



Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

For me, there is a real difference between “being alone” and “being lonely”

For me, I feel more connected when I’m with other people than when I’m on my own

For me, the institutions I belong to (e.g., groups, membership organizations, places of worship, etc.) make me feel socially-connected

Most 40+ adults are satisfied with their social engagement and relationships. Unsurprisingly, adults who are more satisfied have significantly larger social networks. Adults 60+ are the most satisfied with their social engagement.

| Level of satisfaction | Social Network Size (N) |                          |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
|                       | Degree of engagement    | Quality of relationships |
| Very                  | 23                      | 24                       |
| Somewhat              | 18                      | 18                       |
| Not very              | 15                      | 14                       |
| Not at all            | 12                      | 12                       |

Adults 60+ are the most satisfied with the degree to which they socially engage:

- 83% -- 40-49
- 78% -- 50-59
- 87% -- 60+

In general, how satisfied are you with...



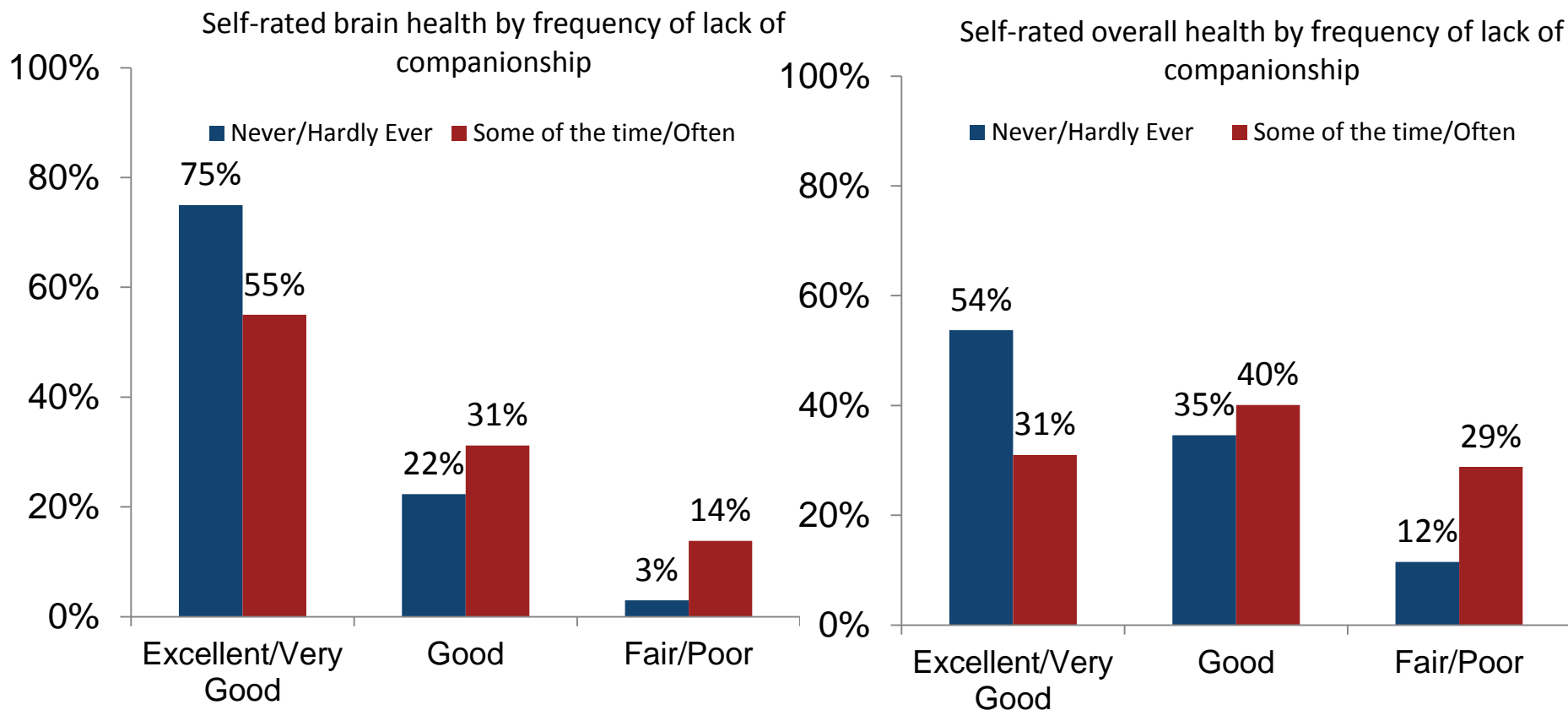
-In general, how satisfied are you, if at all, with the degree to which you socially engage?

-In general, how satisfied are you, if at all, with the quality of your social relationships?

# Social Isolation/Loneliness and Brain Health, Overall Health, and Mental Well-Being



40+ adults who generally feel a sense of companionship are more likely to rate their overall health and brain health as excellent/very good compared to adults who lack companionship.

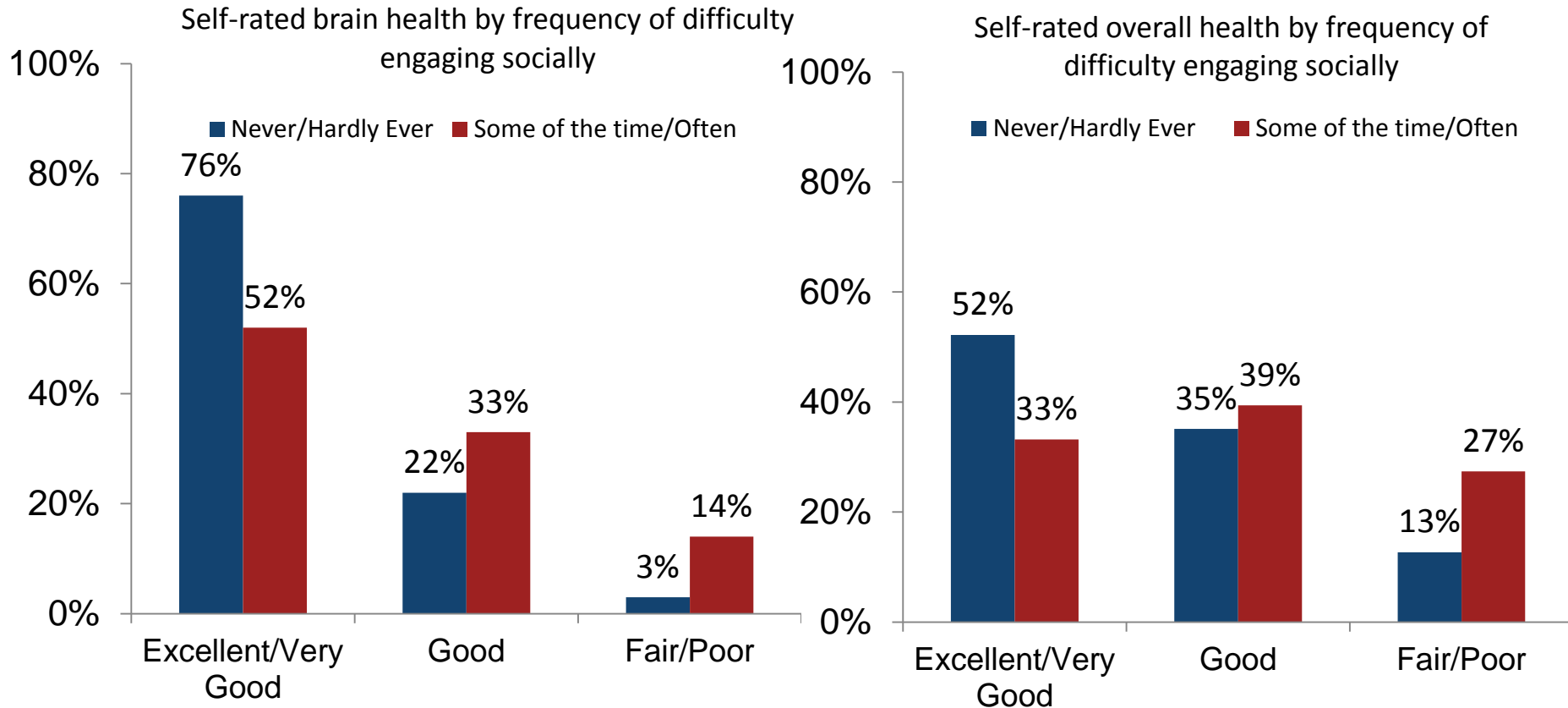


-Would you say that your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

-Getting more specific, would you say that your brain health or mental sharpness is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

-How often do you feel that you lack companionship?

40+ adults who find it relatively easy to engage socially with others are more likely to rate their overall health and brain health as excellent/very good than those who have difficulty engaging socially.

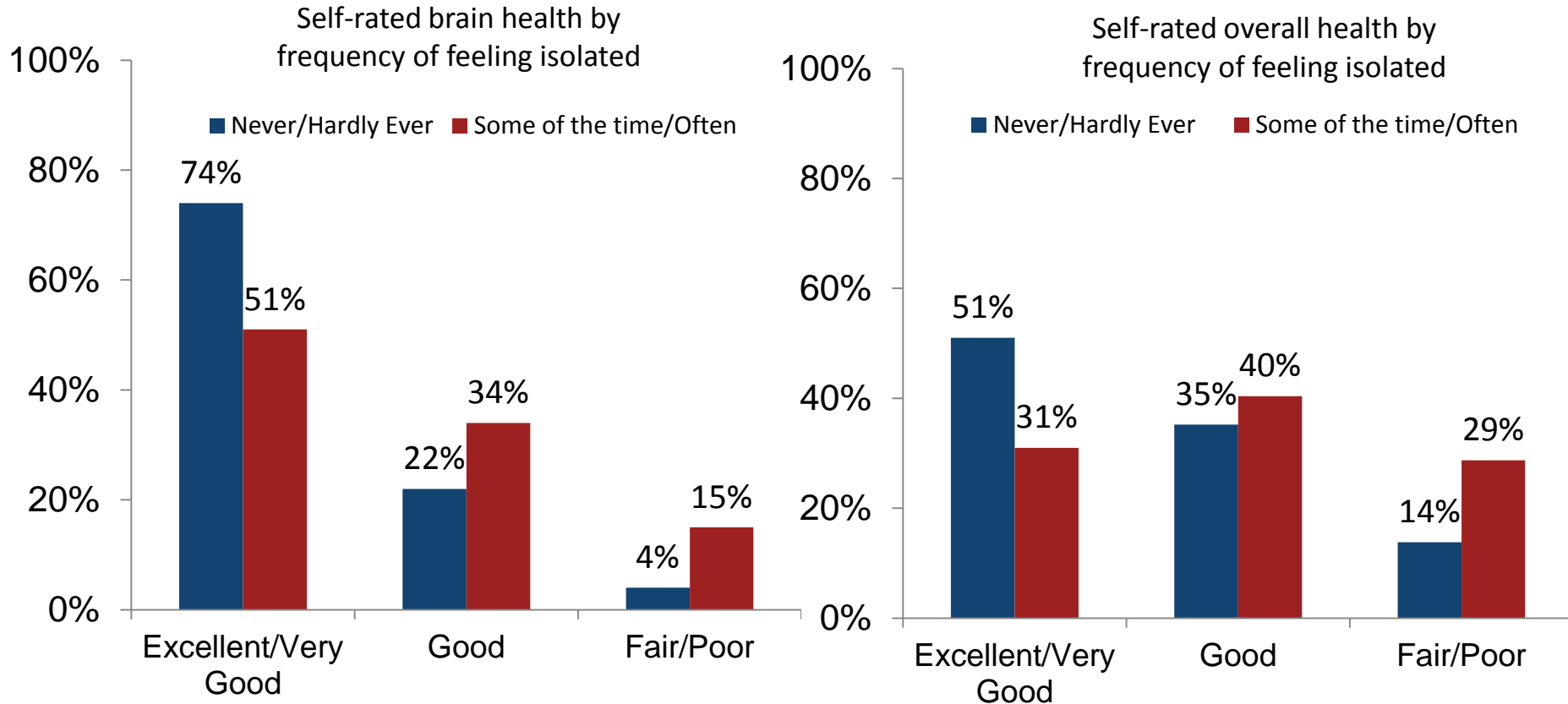


-Would you say that your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

-Getting more specific, would you say that your brain health or mental sharpness is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

-How often, if at all, is it hard for you to engage socially with others?

40+ adults who feel relatively connected are more likely to rate their overall health and brain health as excellent/very good compared to adults who feel isolated.

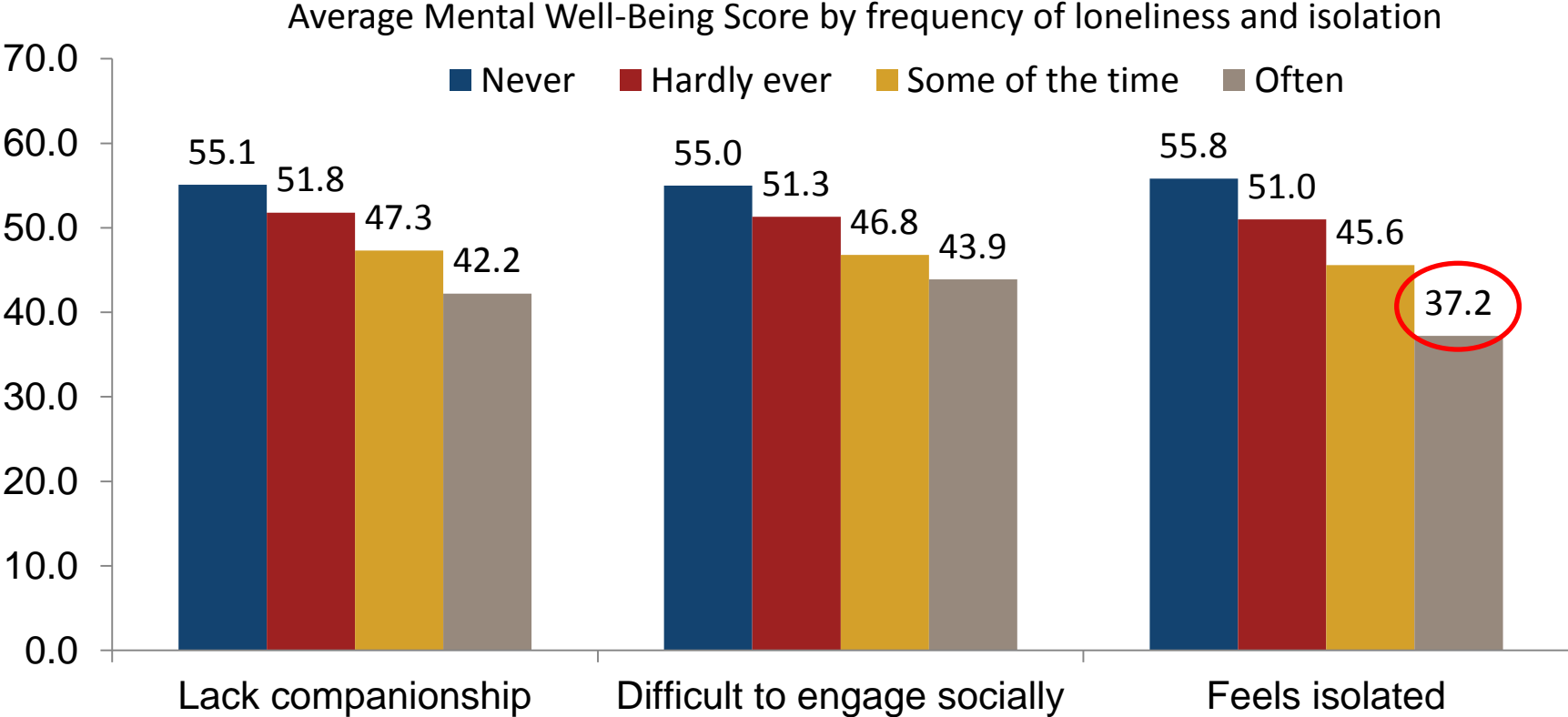


-Would you say that your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

-Getting more specific, would you say that your brain health or mental sharpness is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

-How often do you feel isolated from the people around you?

40+ adults who lack companionship, have difficulty engaging socially, or feel isolated have significantly lower average mental well-being scores. It is especially noteworthy that adults who often feel isolated have the lowest score of all.



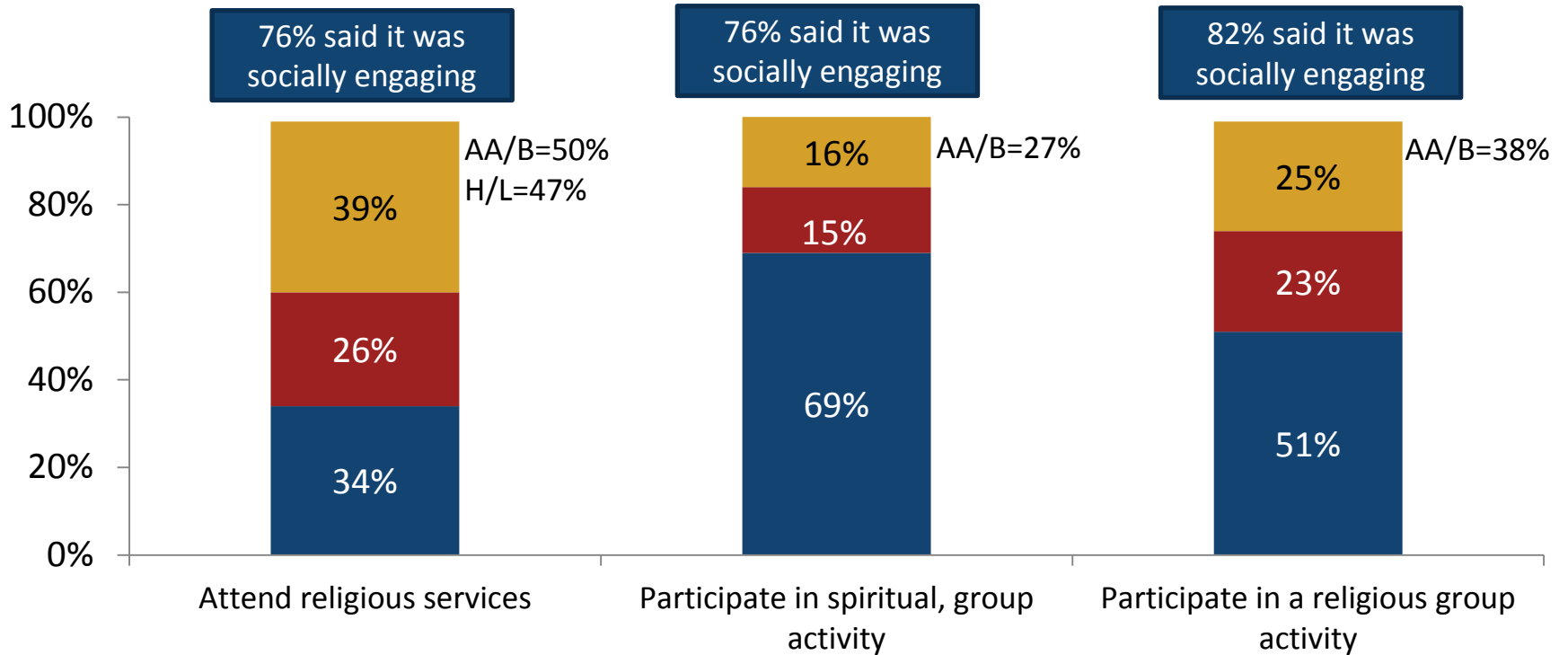
--How often do you feel that you lack companionships?  
--How often, if at all, is it hard for you to engage socially with others?  
--How often do you feel isolated from the people around you?

# Spirituality, Religiosity, and Purpose

Many 40+ adults participate in religious or spiritual activities and they feel these activities are socially engaging. African Americans/Blacks are more likely than the general population to participate frequently in all of these activities. Adults age 60+ (45%) are more likely to attend religious services frequently compared to adults 40-49 (33%) and 50-59 (38%).

In the last 12 months, how often did you....

■ Frequently (once a month or more) ■ Infrequently (Several times per year to less than once a year) ■ Never

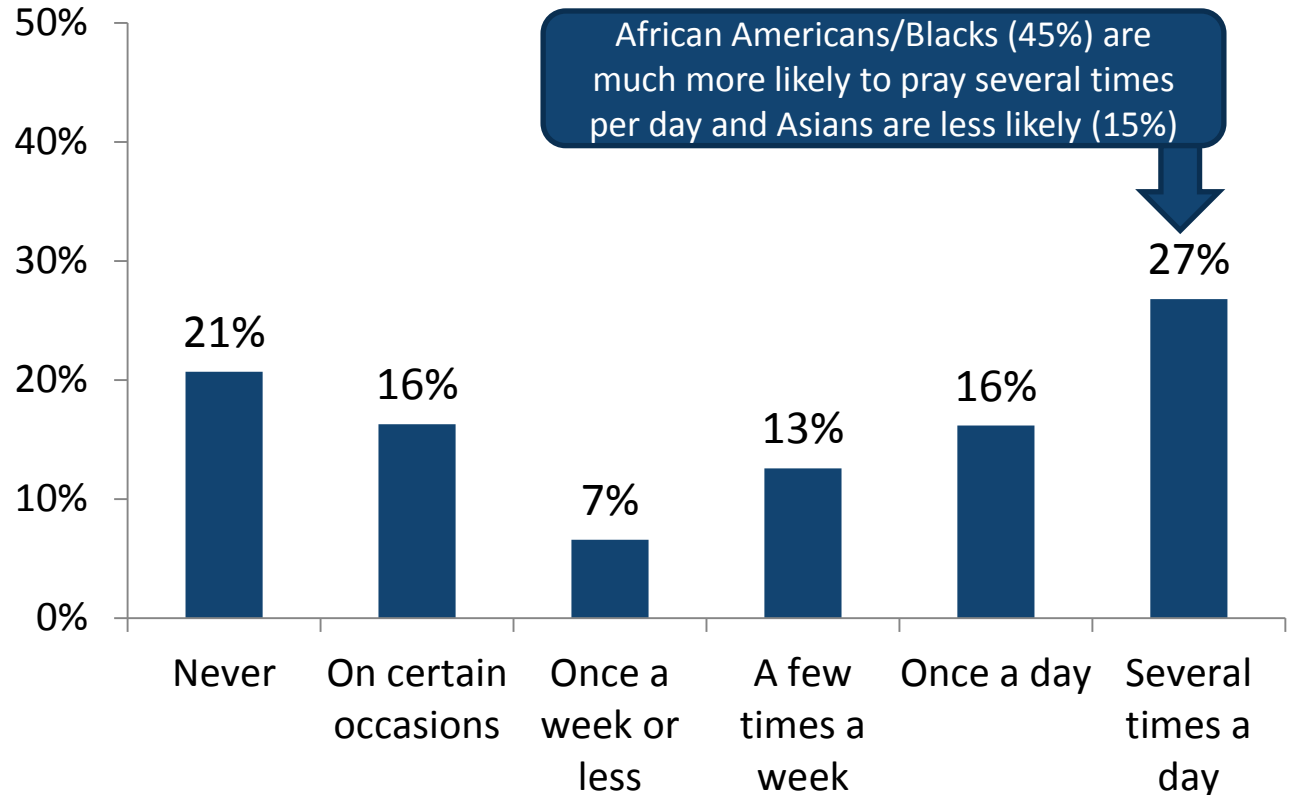


In the last 12 months, how often did you...? (a) Attend religious services. (d) Participate in a spiritual, group activity. (g) Participate in a religious group activity.

Most (86%) 40+ adults believe in a higher power and over one-quarter (27%) pray several times a day outside of religious services. Significantly more African Americans/Blacks (45%) pray multiple times a day.

Do you believe in a higher power?

- Yes (86%)
- No (13%)



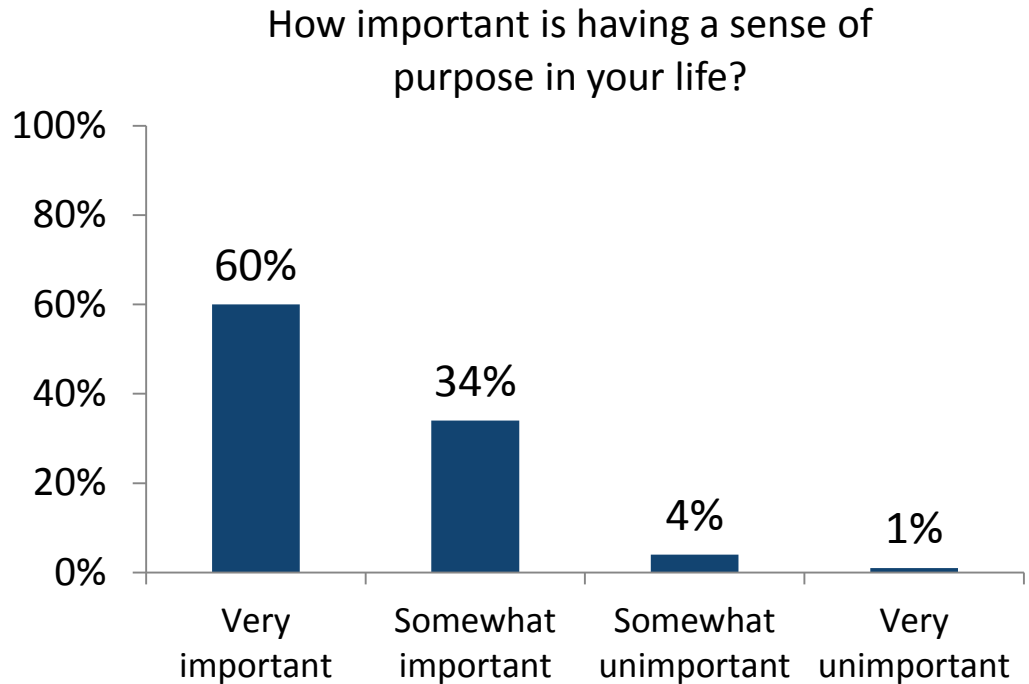
-About how often do you spend time praying outside of religious services?

-Do you believe in a higher power?

Most 40+ adults feel that having a sense of purpose in life is important. For many people, their family and helping others give them a sense of purpose in their lives. The higher the level of perceived importance, the larger the social network size and the higher the mental well-being score.



| How important is having a sense of purpose in your life? | Average             |                         |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------|
|  | Social Network Size | Mental Well-Being Score |
| Very important   | 22                  | 52.6                    |
| Somewhat important                                       | 16                  | 48.7                    |
| Somewhat unimportant                                     | 15                  | 44.1                    |
| Very unimportant   | 15                  | 43.8                    |



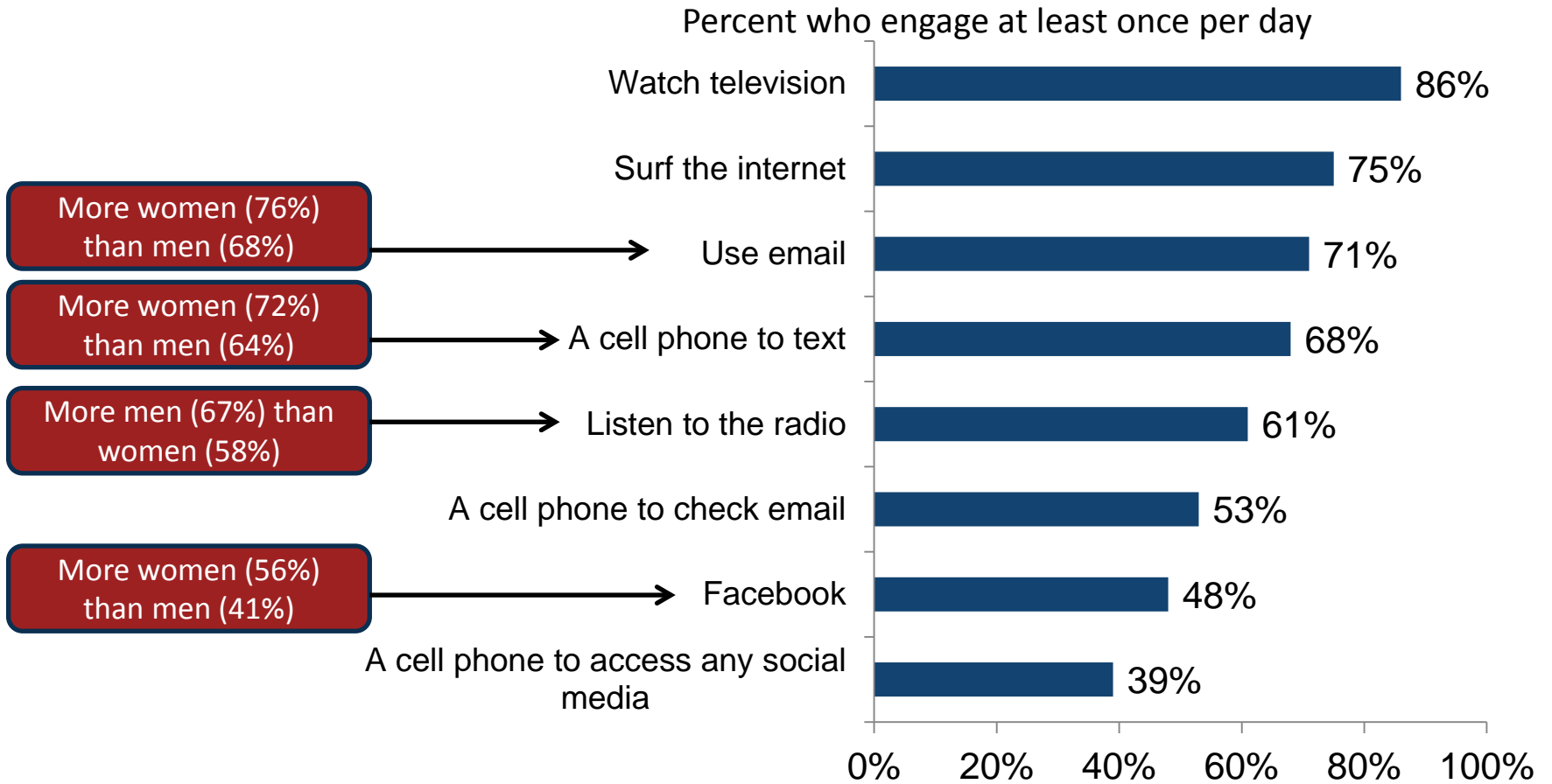
-For you, how important is having a sense of purpose in your life?

-Please describe a few of the things, feelings, ideas, etc. that give you a sense of purpose in your life.



# Social Media and Electronics Use

Nearly half (48%) of 40+ adults use Facebook at least once a day and four in 10 (39%) access social media from their cell phone at least daily. A large majority watch television and surf the internet every day. On a daily basis, very few use Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and video chat.



More women (76%) than men (68%)

More women (72%) than men (64%)

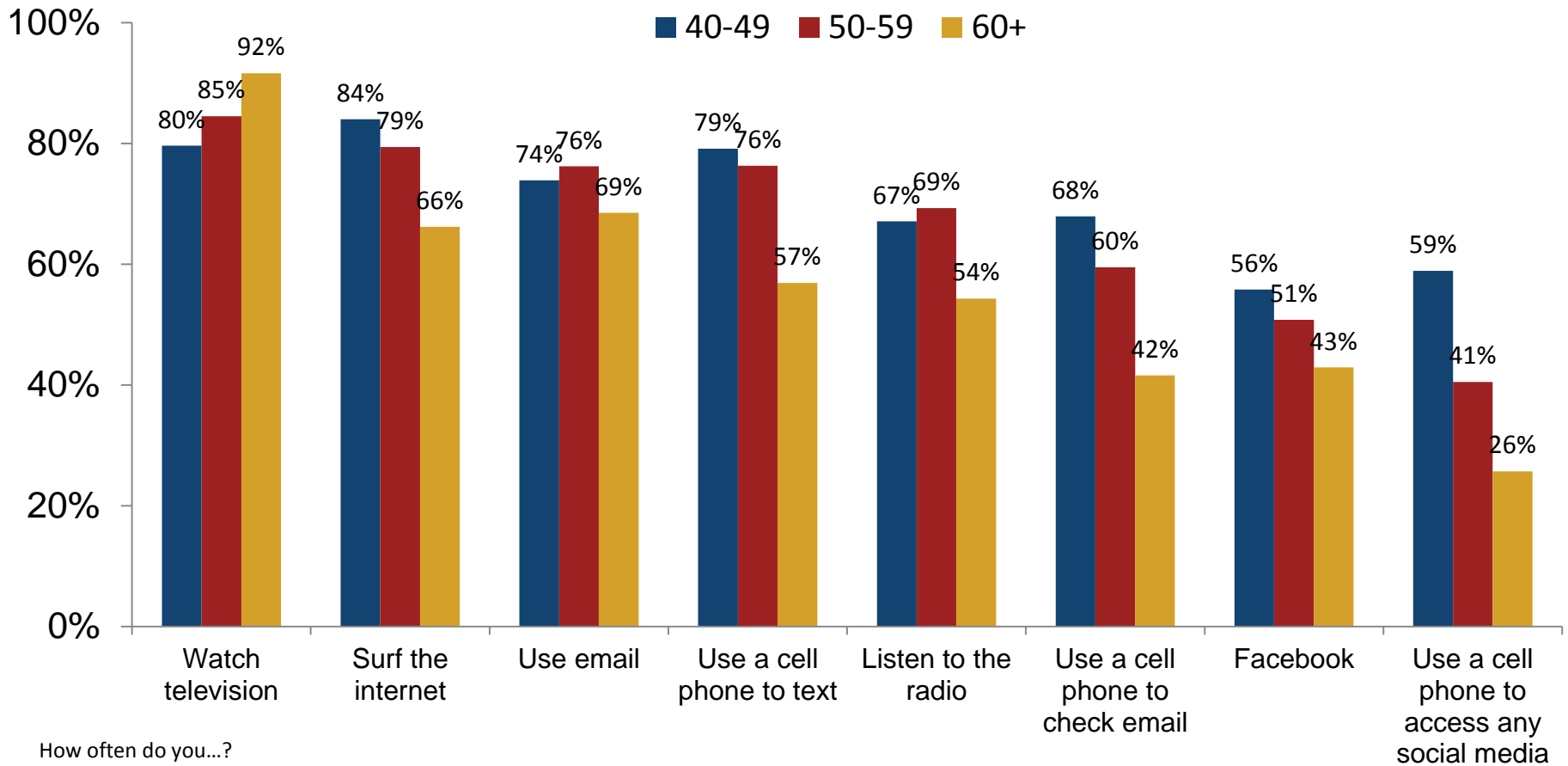
More men (67%) than women (58%)

More women (56%) than men (41%)

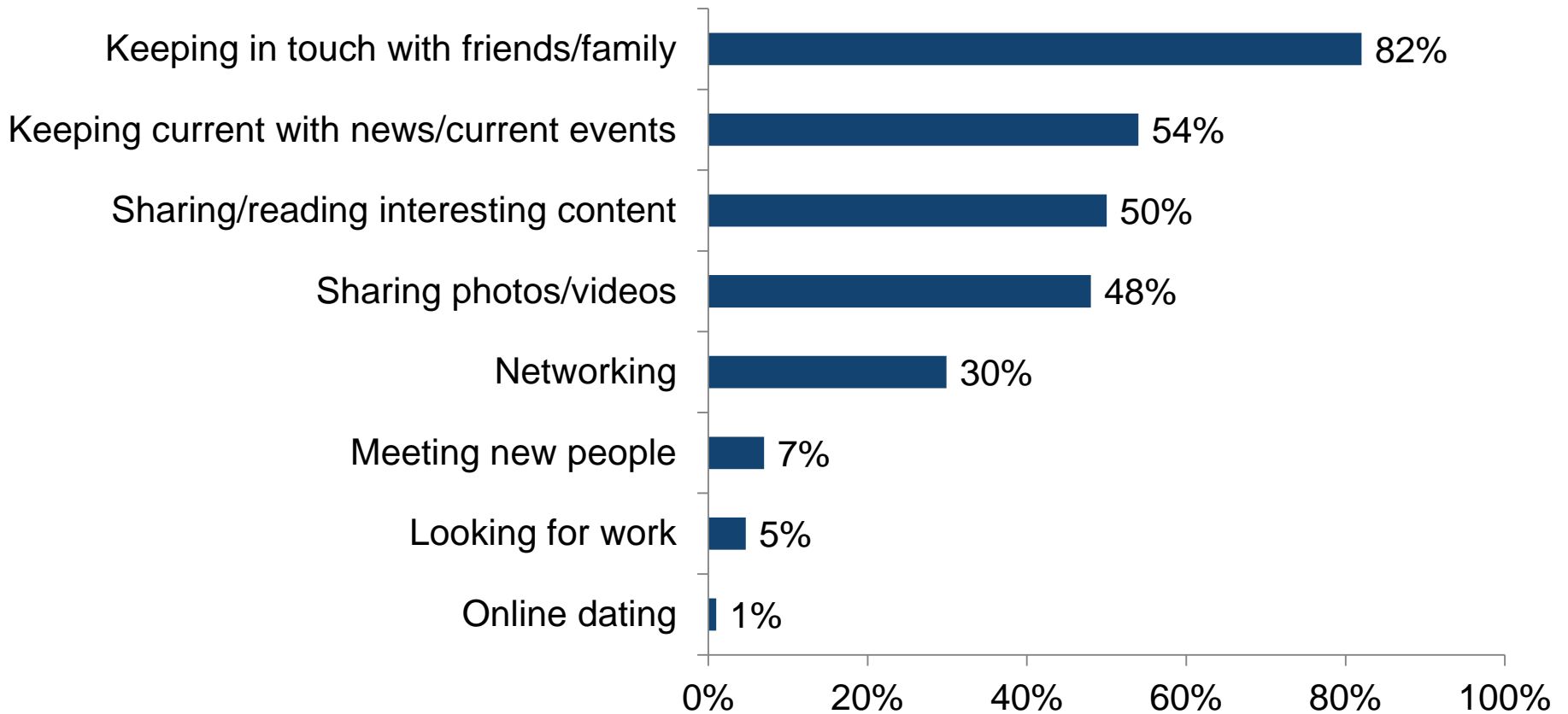
How often do you...?

Significantly fewer 60+ adults compared to adults age 40-59 engage daily in activities related to social media, the internet and cell phones. However, more 60+ adults watch television daily.

Percent who engage at least once per day, by age



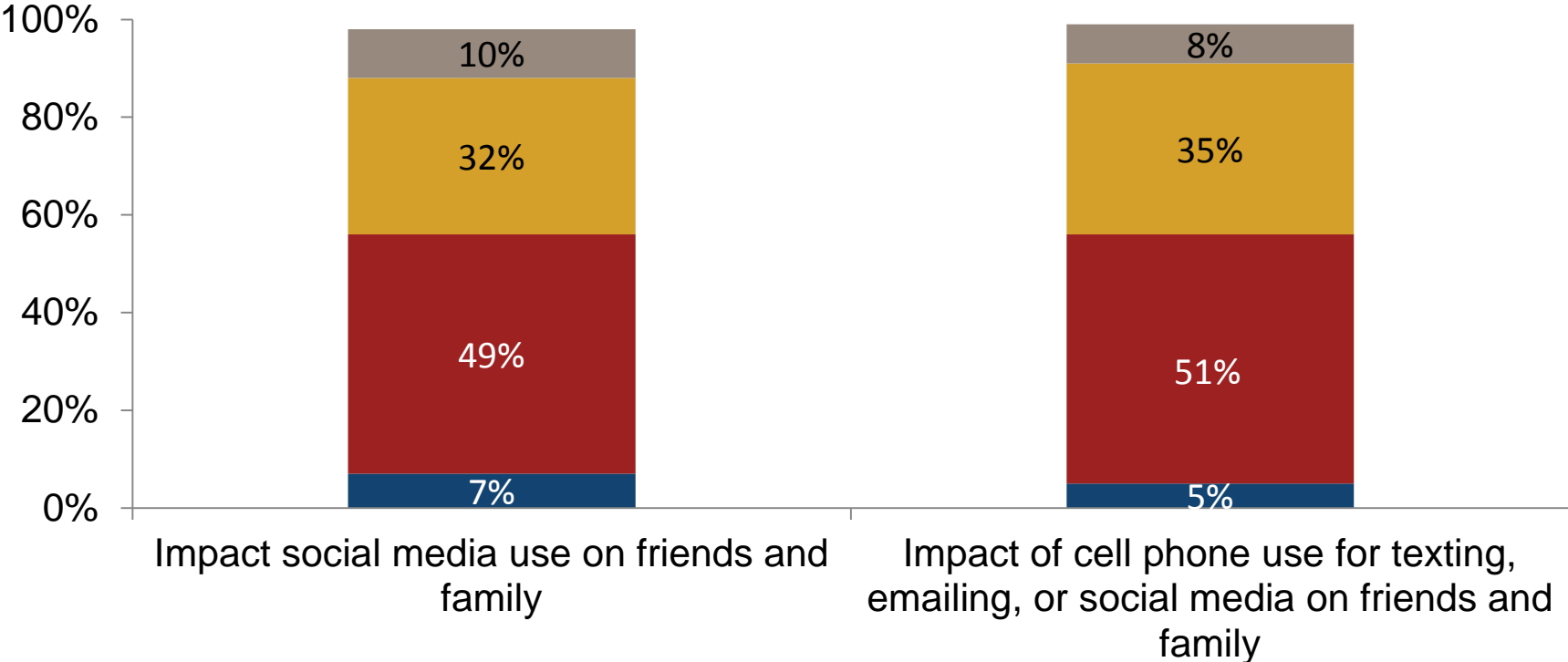
By a wide margin, the most common reason 40+ adults use social media is to keep in touch with family and friends. Significantly more women than men use social media for this reason (86% vs. 77%) and for sharing photos/videos (55% vs. 39%).



-For which of the following reasons do you use social media?

40+ adults say that social media and cell phone use has not impacted their relationships yet one-third or more say it has done more good than harm.

■ More harm than good ■ Has not affected relationships ■ More good than harm ■ Not sure

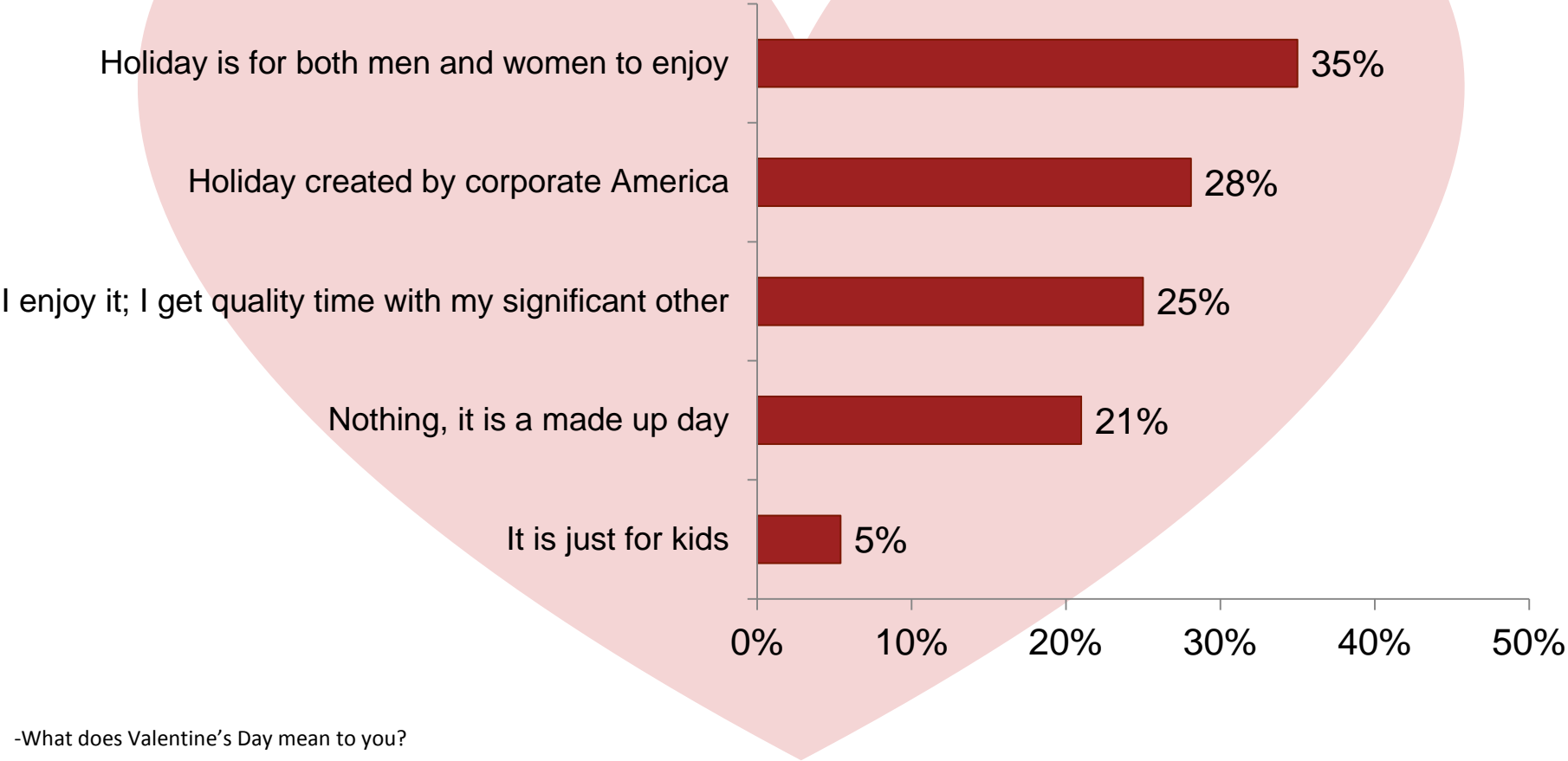


-Would you say that your use of social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has done more harm than good, more good than harm, or has not impacted your relationships at all with your friends and family members?

-Would you say that your cell phone use for email, texting, and social media access has done more harm than good or more good than harm to your relationships with friends and family members?

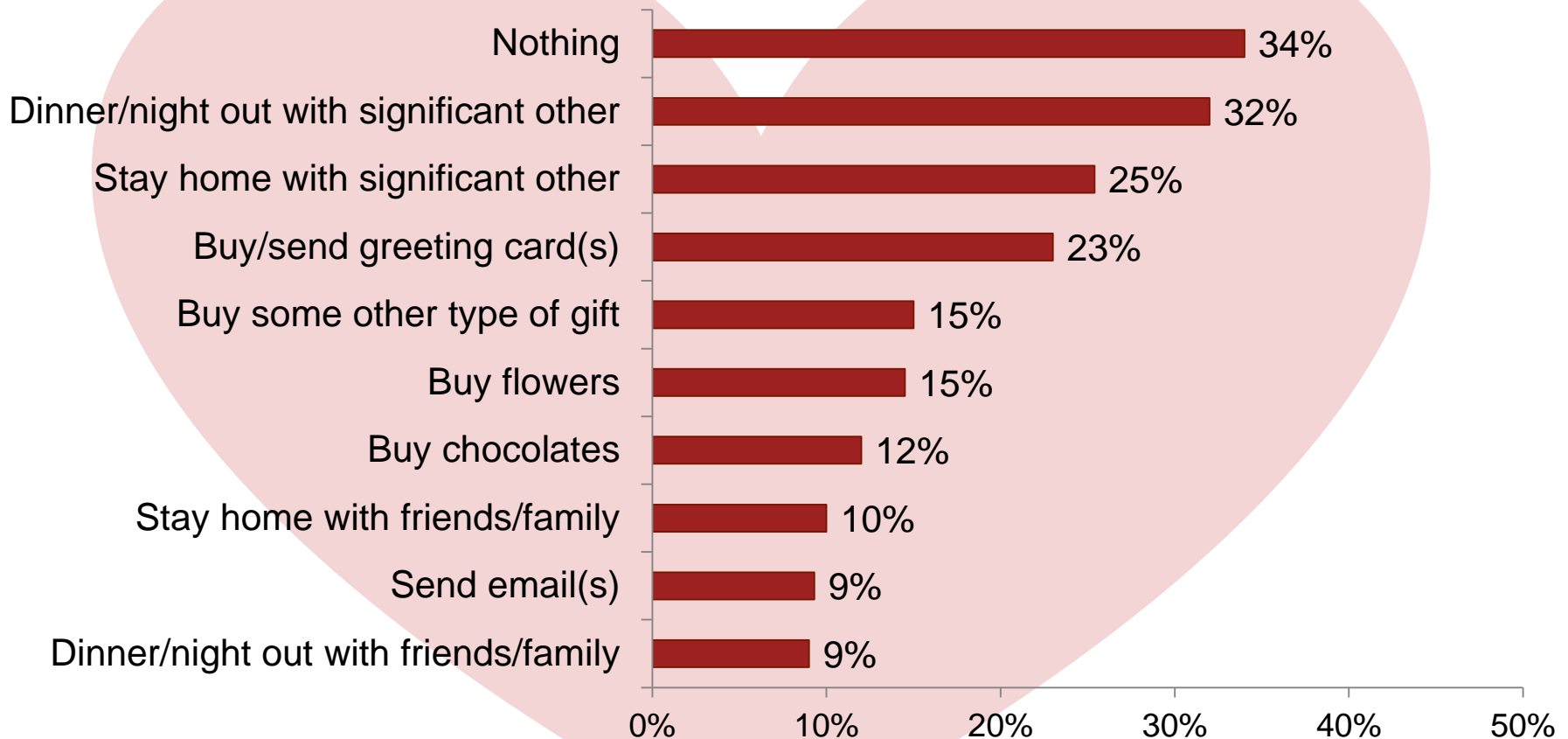
# Valentine's Day

Over one-third (35%) of 40+ adults think Valentine's day is a holiday for both men and women to enjoy but nearly three in 10 (28%) think it is a holiday created by corporate America.



-What does Valentine's Day mean to you?

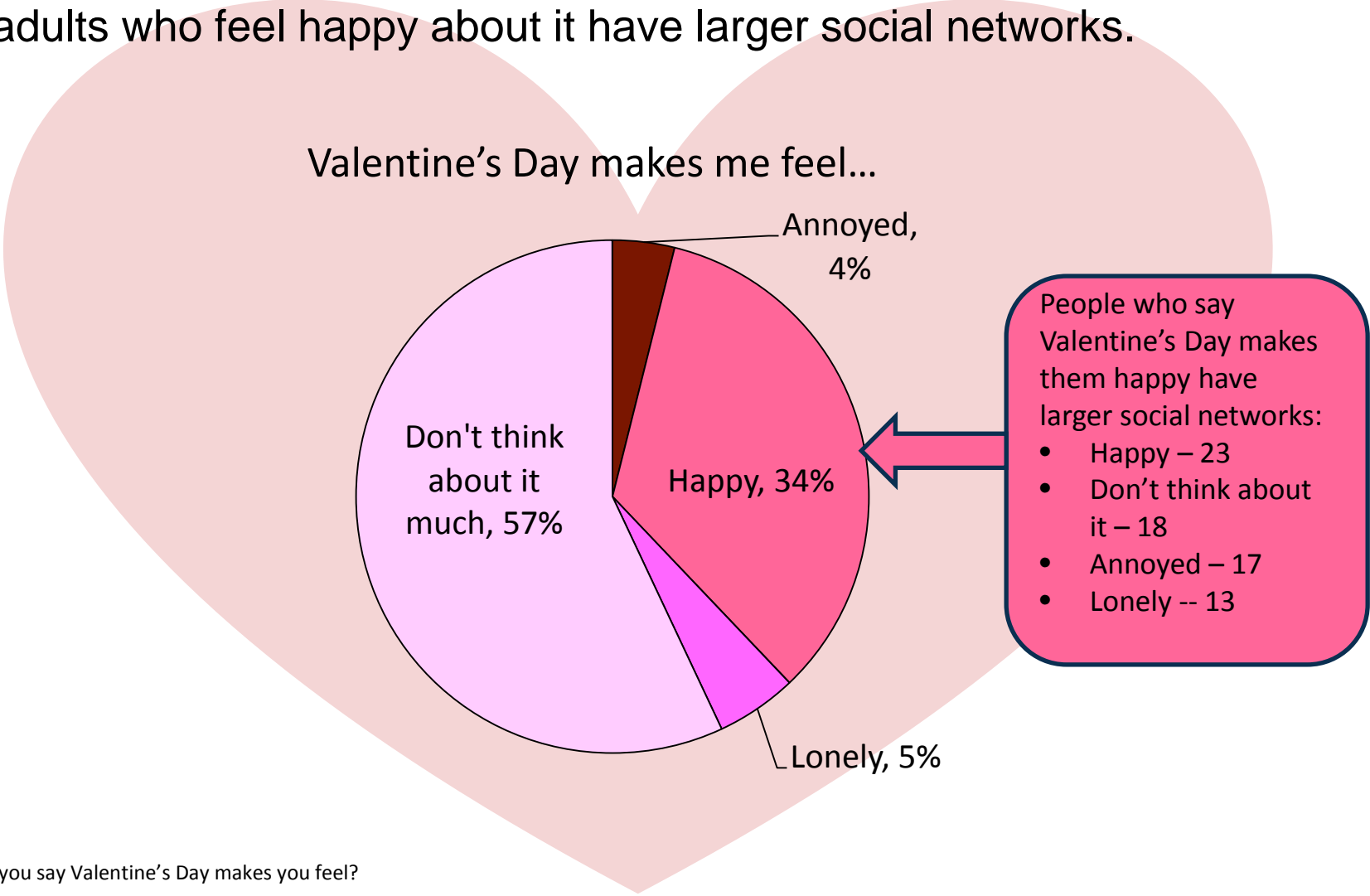
Over one-third of 40+ adults say they do not plan to do anything for Valentine's Day and nearly the same amount expect to have a night out with their significant other. At least 4 in 10 (41%) expect to do something outside of their homes for Valentine's Day.



-Please indicate which of the following, if any, you might do to celebrate Valentine's Day in 2017?



One-third (34%) of 40+ adults say Valentine's Day makes them feel happy and adults who feel happy about it have larger social networks.



-How would you say Valentine's Day makes you feel?