

Grab a book. It's good for your health.

That's one good thing about sheltering in place.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

Sheltering in place, which sounds a lot like what meteorologists order us to do when there's a tornado in the vicinity, has turned into a rather extended affair. Weeks of isolation are becoming months. People are lamenting a loss of definition to their lives as weekdays and weekends blur together. Sharp distinctions between work hours and downtime aren't so sharp anymore. The blue light from prolonged screen time is throwing off our biological clocks and sleep schedules. Even caring about the day's weather, and what we should wear in light of it, hardly matters to our indoor lives.

One consequence of all this indoor time is a lot more idleness than most of us are used to. Since most homes lack a workout gym, people are reporting new levels of sluggishness. "I'm starting to get a tan from the fridge light," says one internet meme. A *New Yorker* cartoon depicts a man fixed to his recliner and his wife talking on the phone nearby: "We're making progress," she says. "He set off the motion detector this morning."

Sedentary living is normally not a recommended state of being for good health. Most sedentary behaviors create huge risk factors for mortality, especially in older adults. But a study by Yale University researchers several years ago showed a significant linkage between book reading and longevity. That's right, reading books leads to cognitive benefits that positively impact greater survival rates. Published in the journal *Social Science and Medicine*, the research found that book readers averaged a two-year-longer life span than those who did not read at all.

The 3,635 individuals involved in the study, all over the age of 50 and tracked for an average of nearly ten years, were asked the question, "How many hours did you spend reading books last week?" Respondents were then divided up into three separate groups: those who read no books at all, those who read books for up to three and a half hours, and those who read more than that. Those in the middle

category were 17 percent less likely to die than non-readers, and those who read most were 23 percent less likely.

The study accounted for the influence of comorbidities (cancer, heart disease, stroke, etc.) on reading or survival, and it made adjustments for the existing cognitive capacities of readers before the study. Still, regardless of wealth, marital status, job placement, sex, race, education, or even depression, older adults demonstrated the survival advantage of reading books.

According to researchers, two cognitive processes involved with book reading help create this advantage. First, there is the benefit of slow and immersive reading patterns that accompany “deep reading.” Second, books can promote empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence.

Not included in this health study was Bob Crowe, a 95-year-old member of our *Christian Century* board of trustees. Bob and his wife, Liz, have hugely empathetic hearts and sharpness of intellect that most 45-year-olds only aspire to. For decades now, these two have been reading books out loud to each other every morning for an hour or more during breakfast. (Full disclosure: they also read the *Century* during these breakfast sessions, a variable that Yale researchers failed to consider when studying survival advantages from reading.)

Well, enjoy this books issue. It’s for your health!

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Reading for your health.”