EXPAND YOUR CIRCLES

Prevent Isolation and Loneliness As You Age

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Connecting You to Community Services

Introduction

Older adults who describe themselves as lonely have a 59 percent greater risk of functional decline and a 45 percent greater risk of death.

"Loneliness Linked to Serious Health Problems and Death among Older Adults," University of California San Francisco (June 2012)

As we age, circumstances in our lives often change. We retire from a job, friends move away or health issues convince us to eliminate or restrict driving. When changes like these occur, we may not fully realize how they will affect our ability to stay connected and engaged and how much they can impact our overall health and well-being.

We need social connection to thrive—no matter our age—but recent research shows that the negative health consequences of chronic isolation and loneliness may be especially harmful for older adults. The good news is that with greater awareness, we can take steps to maintain and strengthen our ties to family and friends, expand our social circles and become more involved in the community around us.

Having a social network that meets our needs means different things to each of us. We hope that the information and resources in this publication motivate you to evaluate your situation and, if needed, take action to strengthen the relationships that matter the most to you. And don't forget—when you open up your world to new people, sharing your time, talents and wisdom, it's a win-win for you and your entire community.

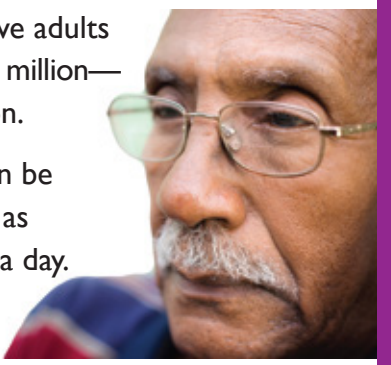
About 29 percent of people age 65-plus live alone and twice as many women live alone as men.

Almost 50 percent of older women age 75-plus live alone.

"A Profile of Older Americans: 2015," Administration on Community Living (May 2016)

How Widespread Is the Problem of Social Isolation?

- An estimated one in five adults over age 50—at least 8 million—are affected by isolation.
- Prolonged isolation can be as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.



"Framework for Isolation in Adults Over 50," AARP Foundation (May 2012),
Perspectives on Psychological Science, Holt-Lunstad-10(2), 227-237 (2015)

What Are the Factors That Put You At Greater Risk?

- Living alone*
- Mobility or sensory impairment*
- Major life transitions or losses*
- Low income or limited financial resources
- Being a caregiver for someone with a serious condition
- Psychological or cognitive challenges
- Inadequate social support
- Rural, unsafe and/or inaccessible neighborhood
- Transportation access challenges
- Language barriers
- Age, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation and/or gender identity barriers

Caregivers: These risk factors may also provide you with clues to what to look for should you have a family member or neighbor who is isolated or lonely.

*Top-ranked risk factors

"Framework for Isolation in Adults Over 50," AARP Foundation (May 2012)

Negative Health Effects of Isolation and Loneliness

Associated with higher rates of:

- Chronic health conditions, including heart disease
- Weakened immune system
- Depression and anxiety
- Dementia, including Alzheimer's disease
- Admission to nursing homes or use of emergency services
- Death

"Social Disconnectedness, Perceived Isolation and Health among Older Adults," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior (2009)*

What Steps Can You Take to Stay Connected and Engaged?

Sometimes it takes effort to stay connected. You may have noticed that your social engagements have decreased or that you have gone days or weeks without speaking to or interacting with others. It never hurts to take stock of your network of activities and friends and to evaluate what you can do to make more connections.

We have enclosed a simple **Self-Assessment Checklist** that will help you determine your level of risk of becoming socially isolated or lonely and whether you should take steps to expand your circles of connection and engagement.

Here are some actions you may want to consider taking to help you stay ahead of the "connection curve:"

- Nurture and strengthen existing relationships; invite people over for coffee or call them to suggest a trip to a museum or to see a movie.
- Schedule a time each day to call a friend or visit someone.
- Meet your neighbors—young and old.
- Don't let being a non-driver stop you from staying active. Find out about your transportation options.
- Use social media like Facebook to stay in touch with long-distance friends or write an old-fashioned letter.
- Stay physically active and include group exercise in the mix, like joining a walking club.
- Take a class to learn something new and, at the same time, expand your circle of friends.
- Revisit an old hobby you've set aside and connect with others who share your interests.
- Volunteer to deepen your sense of purpose and help others.
- Visit your local community wellness or senior center and become involved in a wide range of interesting programs.
- Check out faith-based organizations for spiritual engagement, as well as to participate in activities and events.
- Get involved in your community by taking on a cause, such as making your community more age-friendly.

National Resources

The following national resources can provide a comprehensive level of support for older adults, including the homebound, who are struggling with isolation and loneliness.

AREA AGENCIES ON AGING

Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) serve older adults in virtually every community in America and so chances are, there is one near you. AAAs provide a welcoming environment for older adults and caregivers interested in participating in social and health promotion activities, as well as a range of services such as meals, transportation and in-home services.

To learn more about the AAA in your area, **call the Eldercare Locator at 800.677.1116 or visit www.eldercare.gov** to get connected today.

ELDERCARE LOCATOR

The Eldercare Locator is the only national information and referral resource to provide support to consumers seeking assistance across the spectrum of issues affecting older Americans. T**hrough its National Call Center (800.677.1116), which operates five days a week from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET, and website (www.eldercare.gov),** the Locator serves as a trusted gateway for older adults and caregivers searching for information and resources which can be crucial to their health, well-being and independence.

CONNECT2AFFECT

Connect2Affect is an online resource featuring tools and information to help evaluate isolation risk, reach out to others who may be feeling lonely and disengaged, and find practical ways to reconnect to community. It is for individuals, families and the community at large. **Learn more at connect2affect.org.**

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The mission of n4a is to build the capacity of its members so they can better help older adults and people with disabilities live with dignity and choices in their homes and communities for as long as possible.

Visit **www.n4a.org** to learn more.

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AARP Foundation

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AoA Administration on Aging

n4a

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Resources

"Connect2Affect Introduction"—Lisa Video
www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOG6E18ltoM&feature=youtu.be

"Learn How to Use Social Media and Other Technologies" Tool
http://aarptek.aarp.org/

"Doing Good is Good for You: Volunteer!" Brochure
www.n4a.org/volunteercenter

"Before You Give Up the Keys: Create a Roadmap for Transportation Independence" Brochure
www.n4a.org/consumerbrochures

"Find an Age-Friendly Community in Your Area" Tool
www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2014/member-list.html

"Making Your Community Livable for All Ages: What's Working!" Report
www.n4a.org/livablecommunities

If You Are Isolated and Lonely Now, What Can You Do?

If you feel you are currently socially isolated and grappling with chronic loneliness, reach out to your family, friends and neighbors. Explore the resources described in this brochure to connect with others. There are lots of opportunities for you to get engaged in activities you will like, with people you will enjoy.

In addition, you may want to visit your primary physician and explain how you feel. Recognizing that you feel isolated or that you're having trouble maintaining a social network that meets your needs is the first step to improving your quality of life.

Self-Assessment Checklist

I live alone.	YES	NO
I see or talk to my family members one or more times per week.	NO	YES
I see or talk to my friends one or more times per week.	NO	YES
I provide daily care or support to a family member or friend who needs assistance with everyday tasks (such as preparing meals, providing transportation and grocery shopping).	YES	NO
I generally have a ride or the transportation that I need to get where I want to go.	NO	YES
It is difficult or impossible to leave my home without assistance.	YES	NO
I feel that I make a meaningful contribution to the world or people around me.	NO	YES

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Self-Assessment Checklist (cont.)

On a weekly basis I participate in social activities with family/friends or attend organized group activities, such as church, cultural performances, group meals, exercise classes, support groups, etc.	NO	YES
I often feel that I lack companionship.	YES	NO
I often feel left out.	YES	NO
If I had a problem and needed help or advice, I know someone I could rely on.	NO	YES
If I had good news or an interesting story to tell, I know someone I could tell.	NO	YES
Within the past year I have suffered a major loss or change, like death of a loved one or retirement.	YES	NO

Total answers circled in left column: ☐

Scoring:

2
You are at risk for isolation, but by becoming aware of the risk factors, you can take steps to avoid becoming isolated.

3 or more
You may already be experiencing the negative consequences of isolation and would benefit from taking steps to reconnect and address the barriers that may be causing your isolation.