

## Loneliness and Isolation Among Older Adults

Many people experience seasonal depression, but this month could be especially tough for those already struggling with loneliness and isolation because they've missed out on recent gatherings with family/friends due to COVID-19. This especially includes older adults that have been staying close to home and avoiding crowded places for months because they're at higher risk of getting severely ill from COVID-19. Unfortunately, the same actions and behaviors that help protect this population from contracting the virus can also result in increased feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Loneliness is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact. Social isolation is a lack of social connections. Social isolation can lead to loneliness in some people, while others can feel lonely without being socially isolated. Social isolation and loneliness are serious health issues for people 60 and older and people with severe chronic health conditions, because those feelings are linked to worse mental and physical health outcomes.



**There is strong evidence that many adults aged 50 and older are socially isolated or lonely in ways that put their health at risk. Recent studies found that<sup>1</sup>:**

- Social isolation significantly increased a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity and physical inactivity.
- Social isolation was associated with about a 50% percent increased risk of dementia. Loneliness was associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide.
- Poor social relationships (characterized by social isolation or loneliness) was associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.
- Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization and 57% increased risk of emergency department visits.

Older adults are already at increased risk because they are more likely to face factors such as living alone, the loss of family or friends, chronic illness, and sight or hearing loss. The pandemic has amplified

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<sup>1</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press (2020) (<https://doi.org/10.17226/25663>)

this impact on those who've have been staying close to home and avoiding crowded places for months because they're at higher risk of getting severely ill.

Current research suggests that immigrant, and lesbian, gay, bisexual populations experience loneliness more often than other groups. Latino immigrants, for example, "have fewer social ties and lower levels of social integration than US-born Latinos."<sup>2</sup> First-generation immigrants experience stressors that can increase their social isolation, such as language barriers, differences in community, family dynamics, and new relationships that lack depth or history, the report states. Similarly, gay, lesbian and bisexual populations tend to have more loneliness than their heterosexual peers because of stigma, discrimination and barriers to care.

**Here are some tips for checking in on family members, friends and other older adults you care about who may be at risk for social isolation and loneliness**

- Offer gentle encouragement about technology. There are a lot of options for video calling and choosing just one can be overwhelming, especially for seniors who may not be as comfortable with the latest technology.
  - To make it easier, help them find and become familiar with a video calling app that's easy to use and accessible to their needs.
  - Or if they're already using a particular app, continue with that
- Try senior-friendly tech products such as smart devices designed to address the needs of seniors. There are simplified phone and tablet options with large text and buttons, as well as added security features to keep scammers and spammers at bay.
- Plan a "window visit" like the ones we've all seen on social media of people visiting senior family members at their homes or outside of senior care facilities.
  - Family members stay outside during these visits but chat with the person from a safe social distance, on the phone, or bring handmade signs with messages.
  - These can often feel much more like a "normal" visit because the person can actually see their loved ones.
- Be creative about bringing social distancing into other types of visits, such as sitting on the porch or in the yard and visit from across the lawn or driveway.
- Take a virtual adventure from the safety of home: as long as the person has access to a smart device, encourage them to take advantage of free online virtual tours of destinations like Yellowstone National Park, the Guggenheim Museum in NY, the Louvre in Paris and even Mars.
- Send regular postcards or letters and re-discover the joy of good old snail mail.
- If your loved one has limited abilities, lives in a senior care facility or has an in-home care provider, see if their caregivers can assist in helping the loved one stay in touch.
- Pick up the phone and remember that a simple phone call still works wonders. Just hearing a friendly voice on the end of the line can increase feelings of connectedness and brighten

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html>

anyone's mood. Scheduling regular calls is a good way to ensure that connectedness will continue.

- During your conversations, ask how they're keeping up with their health and wellness routines like regular exercise, good diet, quality sleep and receiving recommended health screenings.
- Be alert to common signs of mental or emotional distress like:
  - Changes in sleeping or eating patterns
  - Changes in daily activities like sleeping more or stopping exercise
  - Increased use of substances often used to cope such as alcohol, tobacco or other drugs
  - Chronic health conditions worsening
  - Signs they are worried or fearful about their own health and the health/safety of loved ones
- Consider setting up a plan with the person's other family members and friends so there's a schedule to help safely stay in regular touch using technology to bridge the distance.<sup>3</sup>

**The following resources provide additional information and support:**

Centers for Disease Control - <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html>

National Council on Aging - <https://www.ncoa.org/>

AARP - <https://www.aarp.org/>

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Fmanaging-stress-anxiety.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Fmanaging-stress-anxiety.html)