

As social isolation grows as problem among older adults, what helps?



Photo: Open Hand

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By Laura Berrios

Going home for the holidays is an opportune time to see how aging loved ones are faring.

Is the house safe, memory still sharp? Are the knees strong? Here's another question to consider in between bites of turkey and dressing: Are they lonely?

While the answer might not be forthcoming, it's an important issue to consider. Social isolation, with the resulting loneliness, is a growing epidemic among older adults and has been linked to higher rates of chronic disease, depression, dementia and even death, according to the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. "This is a public health issue of growing concern," said Lisa Marsh Ryerson, president of the AARP Foundation.

It is estimated that one in five adults over age 50 are affected by isolation, and the national aging association is partnering with the AARP Foundation to raise awareness of the problem.

"One in five is already a huge number, but as the boomer population ages, we can expect to see this problem grow as well," said Dallas Jamison, director of communications for the national agency.

Seniors typically won't admit to being isolated or lonely, but aging experts pick up clues from requests that come into the Eldercare Locator, a national information and referral resource for older adults seeking assistance. The free service can be accessed online at eldercare.gov, or by calling 1-800-677-1116.

The No. 1 request is for transportation, followed closely by home assistance. “Both of these issues are risk factors for social isolation,” said Patrice Earnest, national program director for Eldercare Locator.

Area aging agencies are located throughout the nation to provide a support network of home- and community-based services for older adults. Jamison said they are uniquely positioned to recognize the isolation and provide assistance. Volunteers delivering a meal or providing a ride might be the first people to recognize that there’s a problem, she said.

In metro Atlanta, seniors or their caregivers can contact AgeWise Connection (agewiseconnection.com or 404-463-3333) for referrals or information about services and programs.

Volunteers for the meal-delivery nonprofit Open Hand in Atlanta see firsthand the isolation of seniors in the 18-county area it serves, says Executive Director Matt Pieper.

Senior adults represent the largest segment of clients for Open Hand, and most of them live alone, Pieper said. Volunteers are trained to deliver meals with a smile and engage in a conversation. They don’t just drop off the food and leave.

“Volunteers love this aspect of their services, to brighten the day of those senior adults,” Pieper said.

In many ways, the volunteers are the “eyes and ears” for older adults. If something doesn’t quite look right, they can be on the phone to a caseworker for help, Pieper said.

“This touch point is so important and really makes a difference in the lives of our clients,” he said.

For family members, assessing the loneliness of an elderly loved one can be difficult, especially if you don’t live nearby and most of your contact is by phone, says Lois Ricci, a gerontologist who serves on the AARP Georgia executive council.

For many adults, isolation and loneliness are part of the aging process, especially for those who experience the death of a spouse or need to downsize and relocate.

Ricci said it’s “one of the best-kept secrets” among seniors who don’t want to worry their family members and fear being asked to move out of their home. Many adult children think mom and dad are OK because they don’t complain.

Family members who aren’t around on a regular basis should seek out neighbors and friends to keep tabs on their elderly loved ones and let them know of any concerns. And just being a good neighbor could include checking in on older adults, offering to bring over a meal or stopping by for a chat.

“If nobody’s picking up on it, that’s the problem,” Ricci said.

Kathryn Lawler, manager of the Atlanta Regional Commission’s Aging & Health Resources Division, said seniors need to have the supports and services to stay in their home, but also to continue to feel connected to their community.

“As we age and our lives change, we all face a greater risk of isolation and loneliness. In fact, it is the element of aging we probably fear the most. It is not just the individual that suffers, the community loses tremendous gifts, talents and skills when people become disconnected,” Lawler said.

TOP RISK FACTORS FOR ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

- Living alone
- Mobility or sensory impairment
- Major life transitions or losses

Other risk factors: Limited income; being a caregiver; psychological or cognitive challenges; inadequate social support; living in a rural, unsafe or inaccessible neighborhood; limited access to transportation; language barriers; other barriers due to age race or gender.

TIPS ON STAYING CONNECTED

- Nurture and strengthen existing relationships. Invite people over, or suggest an outing.
- Schedule a time each day to call a friend or visit someone.
- Meet your neighbors.
- If you don't drive, find out transportation options.
- Use social media to stay in touch with long-distance friends.
- Stay physically active and include group exercise in the mix.
- Take a class to learn something new.
- Volunteer.