

The News-Gazette

Staying connected is vital as you age

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By: Chelsey Byers Gerstenecker

The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging along with the AARP Foundation recently launched a national campaign to raise awareness of the growing problem of social isolation and loneliness affecting millions of older Americans. This topic is the focus of the annual Elder-care Locator Home for the Holidays Campaign, which will be conducted through January. This is a national issue because it is widespread and with it comes a higher risk for health conditions. Let's start by looking at the issue.

As people get older, they experience life transitions and losses that often affect their social circle. People retire and sometimes lose contact with their work friends, others move away to warmer climates or they move to be closer to their grandchildren and with that they lose contact with their community of friends. With aging sometimes comes chronic illness and disability, which inhibits ability to participate in activities that were once enjoyed, or eventually the ability to drive and sooner or later the loss of friends and family members.

According to AARP's Framework for Isolation in Adults Over 50 (May 2012):

— An estimated one in five adults over the age of 50 are affected by isolation; this is roughly 8 million Americans.

— Prolonged isolation can be as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

When assessing the negative health effects of loneliness and isolation, people who are isolated have been found to have higher rates of chronic health conditions such as heart disease as well as a weakened immune system. Those who are lonely are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety. They are also more likely to use emergency services and be admitted to nursing homes. Research also shows that social engagement is good for brain health, therefore lack of social engagement may lead to a higher risk of developing Alzheimer's or another form of dementia.

According to AARP's Framework for Isolation in Adults Over 50 (May 2012), there are many risk factors that put you at a higher risk for isolation:

— Living alone.

— Mobility and/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 barriers.
- Age, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation and/or gender identity barriers.

Of these, the top risk factor is living alone, and with 29 percent of people age 65-plus living alone and almost 50 percent of women age 75-plus living alone, millions of older adults could be at risk for isolation. Research from the University of California San Francisco has reported that "older adults who describe themselves as lonely have a 59 percent greater risk of functional decline and a 45 percent greater risk of death."

Individuals need social connectivity to thrive across the lifespan. With greater awareness and effort, we can combat social isolation within ourselves, our families, our neighborhoods and our communities. So how do we combat social isolation?

Take stock of your own friends and networks. Nurture relationships. Invite people over to connect. Get out of your house. Get to know your neighbors. Take a class to learn something new and meet new people. Find others that have similar interests, hobbies, etc. Do something that you haven't had the time to do because you were too busy. Volunteer and give back to a community interest that you believe in. Join or participate in community activities and recreational offerings. Use/learn and utilize technology to reach out to those who live further away. Use a phone or write a letter to connect or reconnect.

As a family member or neighbor, be mindful to help engage those who you worry may be at risk for social isolation. Use the holiday season to stop by, ignite that conversation and build on that relationship. Relationships take time, but it is a worthwhile investment.

Here are some additional resources that may be of use for isolation and other aging related concerns:

- AARP: online resource to help evaluate for isolation and find practical ways to reconnect at [connect2affect.org](https://www.aarp.org/health/aging/2019/07/15/connect2affect/).
- The Eldercare Locator: A public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging connecting older adults and their families to services. 800-677-1116 or [eldercare.gov](https://www.eldercare.gov/).
- East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging: 800-888-4456 or [eciaaa.org](https://www.eciaaa.org/).
- Family Service Senior Resource Center: 217-352-5100 or [famservcc.org](https://www.famservcc.org/).