

Are You Lonely During the Holidays?



December 13, 2016

By Orion Bell

As a kid growing up, Christmas happened three times: once at home and twice more as we visited maternal and paternal grandparents. My earliest memories of cousins, aunts and uncles are those from holiday trips to Louisville and London. As the years go by, the holidays get more complicated. Kids and grandkids of one generation now have kids and grandkids of their own, and the holidays include in-laws and blended families and the coming together of many traditions and expectations. I want to spend time with my parents and siblings. My grown children want to establish family traditions of their own. And so the calendar from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day reflects the effort to see everyone, sometime.

For some in our community, however, the holidays are not a time of togetherness but rather a reminder of the isolation felt each day. It is estimated that one in five people over age 50 are lonely, a problem that has been associated with higher rates of chronic disease, depression, dementia and death. Many of these individuals are separated from loved ones by time and distance, homebound due to illness or mobility limitations, or disconnected from the community because of the demands of caregiving.

Researchers studying the impact of loneliness point to the damage it can do to physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. Isolation increases the risk for heart disease, stroke or high blood pressure and contributes to cognitive decline and the onset of dementia. Lonely folks are more likely to suffer from depression, more likely to fall, more likely to be hospitalized, and more likely to require assistance with long-term care. According to Edwin Walker with the Administration for Community Living, loneliness also is a major risk factor for elder abuse. Loneliness takes a heavy toll.

The [National Association of Area Agencies on Aging \(n4a\)](#), in collaboration with [AARP Foundation](#), launched a national public education campaign earlier this month to raise awareness of the growing problem of social isolation and loneliness in older Americans. This topic also is the focus of the annual Eldercare Locator [Home for the Holidays Campaign](#), developed to encourage discussion of important issues affecting older Americans.

If you are among the one in five experiencing loneliness, take these steps to identify and address the risks in your own life:

- Download the [Expand Your Circles](#) brochure from the n4a website and take the self-assessment.
- Talk to you family physician about your feelings of isolation and the related health risks.
- Contact CICOA to learn more about local resources to help keep you connected with your community.

If loneliness is not your struggle, as you celebrate the holidays with your family and friends, remember those who are unable to do so. Perhaps you can find a way to be part of the solution for others. There are many people in need of assistance, and many worthwhile organizations in need of volunteers and donors to help them. That's true not only during the holidays, but throughout the year.

As we approach this sacred season for many, and look forward to the times of celebration with family and friends, allow me this opportunity to wish you Happy Holidays and a joyous New Year.

About Eldercare Locator

The Eldercare Locator, funded by the [Administration for Community Living](#), is n4a's largest and longest-running national, direct-to-consumer program. The Call Center (800.677.1116) is open five days a week, 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET and serves as an essential, trusted gateway to help older adults, caregivers and aging/health professionals navigate the maze of aging programs and services, as well as to assist them in identifying and accessing the resources that match their needs best. Callers in Central Indiana also will be directed to CICOA for more information and access to local resources.