

The Columbus Dispatch

Isolation puts seniors at risk

Programs seek to connect older central Ohioans to curb illnesses, depression and extend lifespans



Photo: Tom Dodge, Dispatch

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By Encarnacion Pyle

After living in the country and doing a lot of training and showing of horses and dogs, Kathleen Hamilton found it confining to move into a small apartment for seniors and the disabled.

"I told myself, 'I'm not going to sit down and die here,'" said Hamilton, who is still a farm girl at heart at age 69. "I need to be up and moving and talking to people."

But she didn't have much in common with her new Northeast Side neighbors, she said. It also had been harder for her to get around after having "too many accidents and too many surgeries" from too many horses falling on her.

Then she met Margie Hiam, another senior who loves animals, is the oldest sibling in her family and has a contagious laugh.

A volunteer with Catholic Social Services' senior companion program, 78-year-old Hiam visits Hamilton twice weekly to share a friendly smile. They talk about their interests, run errands and go on outings to places such as the library or Oakland Nursery — a favorite, since Hamilton grows orchids.

"Margie brightens my day," Hamilton said. "She's like a sister."

The program was created to help seniors stay connected and remain independent in their homes.

That can be especially important as declining health, lack of transportation or the loss of close friends and family members shrink their social circles. Reduced mobility, hearing or vision loss and lost connections to co-workers after retirement also can lead to isolation.

An estimated 1 in 5 people older than 50 nationwide — roughly 8 million adults — are affected by isolation. The numbers are expected to grow with the explosion of the senior population, making it a public-health threat deserving of more attention and public money, many officials say.

“Social isolation is a killer,” said James Lubben, a professor of social work at Boston College and founding director of the school’s Institute on Aging.

Often overlooked, chronic isolation and loneliness have been linked to depression, physical decline and even shorter lifespans.

It’s a problem that can affect anyone: infants, teens or adults, Lubben said. And evidence suggests Americans are more socially isolated now than ever before.

Researchers have found that prolonged isolation is just as dangerous as obesity, smoking 15 cigarettes a day or alcoholism. Isolation and loneliness can compromise the immune system, increase the risk of a stroke or heart attack and contribute to cognitive decline and risk of dementia.

That’s why eradicating isolation has been identified by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare as one of its top challenges, Lubben said.

Although the terms *isolation* and *loneliness* are often used interchangeably, they’re not exactly the same thing, researchers say.

Loneliness refers to how people perceive their experience and whether they feel isolated. For example, a person can be surrounded by many people but still feel alone. Isolation, meanwhile, can be measured by such things as the size of a person’s social network, availability of transportation and ability to access resources and information.

Both have negative consequences and often require different solutions, studies show.

Whatever the cause, it’s important for seniors to stay connected to the people and things that matter to them, said Elena Portacolone, an assistant professor at the University of California-San Francisco’s School of Nursing.

“We all need to have meaningful social ties and spend time with people who make us feel better,” said Portacolone, who studies isolation.

The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging and the AARP Foundation recently launched a campaign to raise awareness about social isolation. The holidays are the perfect time for people to start a conversation about the problem, the two groups say.

It’s not only important to build awareness, but also to identify solutions, said Lisa Marsh Ryerson, president of the AARP Foundation.

To help seniors and their family members or caregivers, the groups have created several resources, including a brochure that identifies risk factors and outlines steps to stay connected and engaged.

“It’s too often a hidden problem because people don’t want to admit that they’re lonely or isolated,” said Sandy Markwood, CEO of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

Her group represents 622 agencies nationwide that provide in-home help, meals, transportation and other support to seniors and are often the first to realize when an older adult is isolated or lonely.

Two years ago, the Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging started working with Catholic Social Services to match seniors in need of a friend with volunteers. It's one of two programs at Catholic Social Services aimed at combating isolation and loneliness in older adults.

Although skeptical at first, Hamilton said she now looks forward to Hiam's regular visits.

"When a counselor told me about the problem, let's just say I wasn't in the mood," she said.

But the two women had an instant connection and became fast friends.

"We have so many things in common, it's sort of amazing," Hamilton said.

"She only likes me because I talk a lot," joked Hiam. "No seriously, it's mutually beneficial and rewarding."

*To learn more about the national campaign, go to <http://tinyurl.com/z7ubcdc>. The AARP Foundation and several partners also have an initiative called *connect2affect* that highlights research on loneliness and innovative ways to address the issue. Go to connect2affect.org.*