

The Bulletin

Loneliness takes toll over holidays

Experts offer tips for getting help

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Complications from a spinal surgery have left Dona Evans largely bedridden for the past eight months. During that time, she hasn't been able to stand or walk for more than 15 minutes.

In the beginning, friends would come and visit, which helped her feel alright.

"But after a while, people kind of expect you to get well and move on," the 71-year-old Bend resident said.

When people stopped coming, the depression set in. Month five was especially hard. Even though Evans' daughter and son-in-law live in Bend, the family traveled to Indiana for Thanksgiving. She faced spending the holiday alone.

"I was really, really, really done," she said.

*An estimated 12 million Americans over age 65 lived alone in 2014, according to the Pew Research Center. If they don't have social connections, the holidays can be a tough time. Social isolation and loneliness can set in, which research has connected to the development of serious health problems like heart disease, a weakened immune system and depression. In fact, a meta-analysis published this year in the journal *Heart* found poor social relationships were associated with a 29 percent increase in one's risk of heart disease and a 32 percent increased stroke risk.*

A collaborative effort by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging and AARP Foundation called [Home for the Holidays](#) seeks to raise awareness about the critical issue of isolation among older adults, including disseminating a self assessment checklist for those at risk and tips for becoming more socially engaged.

The checklist asks about things like having someone to share good news with or the ability to leave home without help. It's a good tool to let people know if they're at risk, said Dallas Jamison, a spokeswoman for the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

"The individual can go through and check and if it's like, 'Oh, I'm checking a lot of these,' then you know that you might be needing to kind of beef up your connections," she said.

If that's the case, people should let their loved ones know, Jamison said. Long-distance relatives may not realize their mother or grandmother is isolated, and people shouldn't feel embarrassed about saying so.

“There is stigma attached to this,” she said. “We just want to make sure that we get the word out that there is nothing wrong with admitting that you’re lonely or isolated and there is help out there in every community to help you get the support you need.”

Todd Sensenbach, who owns the local Home Instead Senior Care franchise, an in-home caregiver service, with his wife, Lori, said people who know isolated seniors should be vigilant. Stay engaged with the person and don’t assume they’re fine just because they say they’re fine.

“That generation is a very prideful generation and they don’t want to admit that they need help,” he said. “You need to notice that and encourage them to seek help.”

Look for changes in appearance

In the eight years Sensenbach has had his business, he’s noticed that seniors tend to go unnoticed and forgotten during the holidays.

“Our society is very aware of needy children and families during the holiday season and we have all these programs, but seniors, they really don’t,” Sensenbach said. “Life has passed them by in a lot of ways, and during the holidays, that’s pronounced.”

To that end, Home Instead has a program called Be a Santa to a Senior that allows people to buy gifts for seniors who are identified as isolated or low income. The gifts are delivered to them by volunteers. Last year, more than 600 seniors received gifts, he said. It’s a moving experience for those who deliver the gifts, which, in some cases, are the only ones under the trees, Sensenbach said.

Home Instead’s caregivers help clients with things like shopping, cooking, taking medications, bathing, dressing and grooming. They’re not medical providers, but Sensenbach said they develop relationships with clients and often end up becoming important companions to the people they visit.

The Council on Aging of Central Oregon — formerly the Central Oregon Council on Aging — also checks in on potentially isolated seniors through the local Meals on Wheels program, which currently serves 360 people in Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties. Like Home Instead’s caregivers, the volunteer meal delivery drivers aren’t medical providers, but they’re taught to perform wellness checks on clients, said Jean McPherson, the Council’s operations manager. That means they check to make sure clients are OK: They’re not sick, they haven’t fallen and they’re not being abused.

The volunteers — and anyone in the community checking on a senior who lives alone, for that matter — should look for changes in appearance or disposition above all, McPherson said.

“Mrs. Jones always answers the door all perky and, ‘How are you?’” she said, “and that day Mrs. Jones just isn’t with it. Her hair is disheveled.”

Transportation is a barrier

In addition to Meals on Wheels, the Council on Aging also offers a community meal for seniors who aren’t homebound. There, they’re able to socialize with others and play cards, McPherson said.

A big barrier to social interaction locally is just having a way to get there, McPherson said. Transportation and housing are two of the biggest areas of need her organization sees. Low-income seniors and people with disabilities can use Central Oregon’s Dial-a-Ride program, which is priced according to income and requires its users make appointments to be picked up.

The other tip McPherson has for seniors in need: Call us. The Council on Aging is a referral center for all kinds of different services available in Central Oregon.

“One of our primary services is getting people to the right people, even if it’s not us,” she said.

As it turned out, Evans’ Thanksgiving ended up not being lonely after all, thanks to her in-home caregiver from Home Instead. The caregiver showed up at Evans’ door with a full Thanksgiving feast. There was turkey, dressing, green bean casserole, mashed potatoes and gravy and pie.

And the best part? The caregiver sat down and ate with Evans. They talked and laughed.

“It was wonderful,” Evans said. “It made my whole day. She had to leave at 1, but I felt totally satisfied, and I was on Facebook all day telling friends how wonderful she was.”