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Generation Us: Loneliness and social isolation taking a toll on many elders

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By David McNair

When my then-78-year-old mother finally moved to Charlottesville from Rhode Island, after living there for most of her adult life, there were challenges she hadn't anticipated. There were no more close friends or familiar neighbors nearby; she still drove, and she didn't know her way around town yet; she had no social groups; and her balance issues and ulcerative colitis sometimes made her wary about leaving the house. In addition, her son was busy with a new job and taking care of his own family, as was her daughter far away in Brooklyn.

Last month, a campaign was launched by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging and the AARP Foundation to raise awareness about a growing problem — social isolation and loneliness among older Americans. (The campaign link: <http://www.n4a.org/h4h2016>.)

A growing body of research is showing us that social isolation and loneliness among those 50 and older is approaching epidemic proportions. An analysis by AARP estimates that 40 million older Americans are chronically lonely. What's more, the research has shown that loneliness can cause serious health problems, cognitive decline and even death. One line of research even suggests that being lonely can double the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

Locally, according to the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, more than 20 percent of seniors in our area live alone. And that is expected to increase as the older population in Virginia increases. By 2030, Virginians ages 65 and older are expected to make up 20 percent of the state's population.

"Social isolation for seniors is huge and is often a multi-layered issue," said Danielle Lee-Powell, a geriatric care manager in private practice. "It can be as simple as folks not wanting to go out and about because they are settled in their respective routines; however, there can also be additional issues that are going on that aren't readily identifiable, such as vision and hearing impairment, limited mobility, confusion and social anxiety."

Indeed, when seniors are suffering from loneliness, family members sometimes can be the last ones to know. My mother, who was born during the Depression and raised a family on her own after her husband died, was a proud woman and not one to complain. She often joked that she would rather drive her car off a cliff than be a burden to her family. But there were noticeable cracks in the facade after she moved to Charlottesville.

"New situations are extremely overwhelming, and that includes unexpected or unplanned outings and events that are out of the norm for that person," said Lee-Powell. "And that can lead them to stay in their own spaces that they can safely navigate."

My mother always had been a bit of a loner, and did not suffer fools, so she wasn't always the most social person. But as the new research also has shown, without meaningful, regular connections with other people, we are diminished.

Those seniors studied have said being lonely made it harder to dress, bathe or walk. They also felt scared and worried about their safety and independence. An accidental fall, losing the ability to drive or the worsening of a medical condition can change everything. And so much worry was zapping their physical and mental resources. It can be a vicious circle.

Fortunately, I recognized some of my mother's cues and began to make regular visits to sit and talk with her and just hang out, drive her somewhere — simple things. In turn, I noticed she was striking up friendships with her new neighbors, spending time at the library, taking an exercise class, calling me randomly to talk about her day and learning her way around town. Now that she's passed away, I'm glad I picked up on those cues.

Lee-Powell offers a few helpful ideas to help elders who may be feeling lonely:

- » Visit on a consistent schedule. Pick a day and a time that is usual for you to stop in and visit and spend some quality time.
- » Turn off the televisions, radios and background noises and take time to relax and begin easy and pleasant conversations.
- » Don't visit with an agenda or a to-do list. Let the time spent be just that — time spent and enjoyed and see where it takes you.
- » Planned outings should be truly planned in advance, and get input from your loved one as to what they'd most like to do.
- » Avoid loud and overly busy areas to dine or shop. Small, cozy and quiet places are best — and much less overwhelming to all of the senses.

"We have to be mindful that while we may think our beloved elders are 'just set in their ways,' they are coping with tremendous losses," Lee-Powell said. "And not just the regular ones that come to mind of spouses, friends or family ... but of their hearing, vision, mobility, independence. All are losses we tend to forget."

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