

Forbes

Loneliness: A Growing Health Threat For Older Adults



December 25, 2016

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When Sol Moran, 63, left her home in Puerto Rico to move to Minneapolis, things initially went well. She enjoyed being closer to her son, who lived in a nearby suburb, and she had a job she enjoyed. Then Moran got hit with a constellation of serious illnesses. She wasn't able to keep up her work as an interpreter and home health aide and didn't have the energy to get out of her apartment for anything other than medical visits.

Her world became very small.

"I had given up on life," Moran said last week. "I was wondering sometimes why I had a phone," since the only calls she received were about doctors' appointments.

'A Potent Killer'

Loneliness and social isolation are not merely a source of sadness for many older adults. Studies have shown that isolation increases the risk of mental and physical illnesses. In fact, the health risks of prolonged isolation are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, according to the AARP Foundation.

“Social isolation is a potent killer,” said James Lubben, a professor at Boston College School of Social Work. “We need to start taking it much more seriously.”

The numbers of older people affected by loneliness and isolation are striking. According to the new AARP Foundation website [Connect2Affect](#):

- 17% of American adults 65 and older are isolated
- Research shows a 26% increased risk of death due to subjective feeling of loneliness
- 6 million adults 65 and older have a disability that prevents them from leaving their homes without help
- 51% of people 75 and older live alone

Campaign Highlights Isolation and Seeks Solutions

The Eldercare Locator Home for the Holidays campaign launched last month by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging aims to bring more attention to the issue.

Those who are suffering from isolation are encouraged to reach out (see the “How to Get Help” section below). And organizations or individuals across the country can share ideas for how to lessen isolation in local communities.

Why now?

“Certainly we know that the overall aging population is growing rapidly,” said Edwin Walker, the U.S. acting assistant secretary for aging. “Isolation and loneliness are known to be associated with higher risks of chronic disease, heart disease, depression and anxiety, even dementia and Alzheimer’s. And all of these things could lead to the ultimate risk factor of having a person prematurely go into a nursing facility or some type of long-term care facility or even have to use emergency services. And that’s what we want to avoid.”

Risk Factors for Isolation

The top risk factors for isolation include the following, the AARP Foundation says:

- Lack of accessible and affordable transportation
- Health issues such as untreated hearing loss, dementia, lack of mobility and frailty, which interfere with social connectedness
- Life transitions, such as retirement, becoming a caregiver or losing a spouse or friends
- Ageism and being limited by a lack of opportunities to contribute to one’s community
- Poverty and discrimination because of social status, race, gender identity or sexual orientation
- Living in a rural area where interactions with others are more difficult

Older adults who are isolated are also at greater risk of elder abuse, fraud and scams, said Lisa Marsh Ryerson, president of the AARP Foundation.

“If you’re isolated, you may be more prone to pick up that phone [from a scammer],” Ryerson said. “It is also equally true that if you have been a victim of fraud or of a scammer that that very experience tends to make people isolated — there is a level of shame, sadly, that goes along with that, shame that can cause older people to retreat.”

Plan Ahead for Changes

While isolation is not reserved for the old, it is more likely as we grow older and shift away from busy careers and child-rearing. Only then may we realize that we have put too little into our relationships, Lubben said.

“I don’t think a lot of people have weighed in their personal lives the consequences of not nurturing our social ties,” he said. “My real concern is in our society we have elevated the notion of rugged individualism, which is counter to the reality. We get through life with the help of our friends and family who nurture us during critical points in our lives.”

He urges people to not wait for a crisis but to “build up that social capital much like we want to build up our financial capital” for our later years.

It’s also important for doctors and nurses to regularly ask patients whether they feel lonely or isolated, Lubben said. These medical professionals should help older adults by proactively asking patients how much they are alone and how they are feeling, he added.

How to Get Help

This brochure from the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging includes a self-assessment checklist to gauge your risk of isolation and its effects. You can also find resources through the federal Eldercare Locator, at 800-677-1116 (you may reach a busy signal) or visit www.eldercare.gov. Another suggestion if you feel isolated: tell a health care worker when you visit for an appointment.

Dawn Simonson, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging near St. Paul, Minn., said her group’s partners and others like them across the country provide regular services like transportation and meals to older adults. “Those very basic home and community-based supports can be very beneficial,” she said. “It’s human contact, and there’s a relationship that’s established.” The programs are paid for by federal and state money through the Older Americans Act.

Finding a New ‘Family’

Moran weighed less than 110 pounds at the height of her isolation and illness. She thought her life was near its end. Then a social worker pressed a piece of paper into her hand. Circled on it was Centro Tyrone Guzman, a nonprofit that runs a senior center in Minneapolis. Moran started going there once a week.

“Now I feel like I have a family and I feel happy,” she said, after ducking out of a Centro holiday party to talk. “It’s given me hope and I don’t feel so alone. Actually I don’t feel alone at all because I have friends. We bond. It’s nice.”