

All the lonely people: Social isolation puts local seniors at risk

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By Sarah Heth

Loneliness can be deadly.

In fact, in a study conducted last year at Brigham Young University in Utah, researchers found that loneliness and social isolation had an effect on health that was equal to being an alcoholic or smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

While participants in the study were about 3 million adults aged 65 and younger, the effect on seniors with limited mobility cannot be overstated.

"I think one of the No. 1 challenges (for seniors with limited mobility) is isolation," said Sarah Milanowski, Intake & Outreach coordinator at LifeCircles PACE, a program of all-inclusive care for the elderly. "People want to live at home, but a lot of times without the right kind of support ... their community just shrinks. Their peers, their loved ones and friends pass away, in some cases. Their world just kind of shrinks to their four walls."

That's why National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) has launched a 2016 "Home for the Holidays" campaign, focusing on fighting the issue of loneliness and social isolation in seniors around the country.

One local senior spoke of the difficulty of limited mobility.

"You feel very isolated," Marilyn Manders, 73, of Holland, said. She was injured last year and found herself unable to walk across the room, let alone outside. "Family coming to visit and friends meant so much," she said.

But that isolation can lead to bigger problems, Milanowski said.

"Sadness and depression are definitely part of isolation," Milanowski said.

"At times, some of that depression can even spiral for older adults into cognitive decline. You use or you lose it."

She said that solution is to interact with people.

"(People's) brains are just not going to function as well if they're not engaging with people," she said. "Even for the less social people ...; just having a conversation just 10 minutes a week is going to be huge for them."

Offering that interaction is a big part of all the local support agencies for seniors.

"There's a lot of programs out there that the social isolation isn't the main focus of it, but it's an important part that we don't always think about, to just check on somebody," said Lisa Tyler, communications director at Senior Resources of West Michigan.

Senior Resources offers many of those services, as does LifeCircles PACE and Evergreen.

"Sometimes we are seeing older adults that are really isolated, and we believe that there's a number of resources to reverse that loneliness and isolation," said Jo Ver Beek, director at Care Services of Evergreen.

"The Commons (of Evergreen) is a place that allows people to meet their peers, to be actively involved in something with their peers and definitely prevents loneliness," she said, although the Commons is a place for seniors who don't struggle with getting out of their homes as much. "The group of people that I have the most concern for is that person that can't get out of their home," she said, adding that the nonprofit's home services can be a lifeline of human interaction. "That volunteer just stopping in to deliver the meal is something that an individual looks so forward to. And that's just one service."

Churches also often provide a place for seniors with limited mobility to find community.

"The church I go to, they do a marvelous job," Manders said. Church members pick her up and bring her to church, as well as meet with her for coffee weekly.

"Our pastor said, 'This is a family,' and that's what you feel when you go there. And we are, we're all a family of God," she said.

For seniors who think loneliness might be a struggle they're currently facing, n4a.org has offered a brochure with a checklist and information on recognizing the signs and finding ways to be more social at bit.ly/2hjBE28.

But offering support to seniors in this community is something everyone can do without too much effort, said Tyler.

"It's something that anybody can do, too," she said. "It doesn't cost you money to call somebody or check on somebody. You don't have to have financial resources or a car to do that."

Manders agreed.

"It's very important for neighbors to check on older citizens," she said, "or help them out by shoveling their snow or mowing their lawn."

It's good advice for everyone, Milanowski said.

"It's a good principle for anyone regardless of their age: getting to know your neighbors, stopping by and saying hello," she said.

"There's so many cultures around the world that hold their elders in reverence, and I don't know that we do that as well as a lot of cultures do."

And doing so, she said, might offer something in return.

"Some people think going to visit someone who's older might get them roped into more than they bargained for," she said, "but a lot of times you can really build relationships."