



'Tis the season to reach out to your neighbors who may be lonely

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Not everyone can look forward to the fun-filled, family-centered holiday season that marks the festive, celebratory image — from sugar plums dancing in dreamy heads to bright lights and beautifully wrapped packages to cookie baking in the oven and chestnuts roasting before open fires.

A nice tableau, if you can actually get into it in real life.

But the 2016 Home of the Holidays Campaign reminds us that the holidays can mean even more social isolation and loneliness for many of our neighbors, particularly the elderly.

The AARP Foundation and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging are conducting an awareness campaign to encourage people to reach out to those who may need a little more help this holiday season.

"It doesn't have to be a huge effort," says Mary Schmidt, assistant director of the Area Agency on Aging and Homecare Coordinator for the Bluegrass Area Development District. "We just want everyone to think about other people and reach out as much as possible."

Notice — really notice — the elderly in your church and in your neighborhood. Their isolation may not always be obvious.

"There are lots of reasons families can't always convene and there are lots of reasons some people don't have a natural support system."

Research shows that social isolation and loneliness has been linked to higher rates of chronic disease, depression, dementia and death in older adults. Prolonged social isolation can equal the health effects of smoking 15 cigarettes a day, the research shows.

So, the campaign involves reaching out to the elderly as well — "Expand Your Circles: Prevent Isolation and Loneliness As You Age" (<http://info4seniors.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Expanding-Circles.pdf>) is part of that. Check out the resources on the web site — including a self-assessment that may lead you to steps to get connected and engaged.

Schmidt says this aspect of the campaign encourages the elderly to develop some social media savvy — connecting with others online, in chat groups to mitigate isolation.

"And we're encouraging friends and neighbors to teach their elderly loved ones about social media — and to help them with transportation options that might be available to them."

The isolated elderly almost never have reliable transportation, sufficient living space or a range of activity options. And most of those impediments are usually exacerbated by safety concerns and mobility issues, says Schmidt.

“We are on the frontline of helping our elderly citizens live with dignity and independence in their homes,” said Schmidt. “And we make every effort to connect them to the in-home services that are vital to their well-being. We are often the first who realize an older adult is isolated and lonely.”

But during the holidays, she says, she hopes everyone is being particularly watchful — and in the spirit of the season, will reach out in every way possible to those who may need a helping hand or a bit of extra attention.