

STAT

Loneliness is bad for your health. This new campaign aims to curb isolation



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November 16, 2016

By Judith Graham

A new national campaign rolling out on Wednesday aims to raise awareness of a hidden but devastating complication of aging: loneliness.

Tens of millions of adults are chronically lonely. And a growing body of research has linked that isolation to disability, cognitive decline, and early death.

The first-of-its kind campaign, organized by the AARP Foundation and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, aims to help seniors assess their social connectedness and suggest practical ways they can forge bonds with other people. And what they are doing can be emulated by the rest of the nation, as the number of people 65 and over is projected to explode from 48 million to 77 million between now and 2035.

“This is a public health issue of growing concern,” said Lisa Marsh Ryerson, president of the AARP Foundation.

Addressing stigma will be a priority. “Who wants to admit that, ‘I’m isolated and I’m lonely?’” said Dallas Jamison, a spokeswoman for the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. “It’s a source of shame and embarrassment.”

Her organization represents 622 agencies across the country that provide meals, transportation, in-home help, and other support to seniors. They’ll take the lead in identifying older adults who are isolated and linking them to resources, in part through the federal government’s Eldercare Locator. The campaign will also encourage families to talk about these issues during the holidays.

These efforts come as research highlights the physical and emotional toll of isolation in later life.

A seminal study of more than 1,600 seniors age 60 and older found that lonely people were far more likely have difficulties with walking, bathing, dressing, and climbing stairs than those who were not. They were also 45 percent more likely to die during the six years that researchers tracked them, from 2002 to 2008.

Some 43 percent of seniors interviewed for that study said they were lonely — a subjective feeling of not being meaningfully connected to other people. Based on a separate analysis, AARP estimates that 42.6 million adults age 45 and older are chronically lonely.

That feeling of isolation sounds an “I’m not safe; all is not well” alarm in seniors, raising blood pressure, sparking inflammation, inspiring stress, and interfering with the immune system’s response.

“If you’re lonely, you feel there aren’t adequate people around to support you and that means you have to surveil your environment continuously for every kind of threat,” said Linda Waite, director of the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project and a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago.

“This consumes cognitive, physical, and psychological resources,” Waite said, “and makes it harder for you to do other things that might be beneficial to your health.”

Social isolation may mean that you rarely get out of the house and lack a support system of people who will notice when you’re feeling sick, bring over chicken soup, go out and get a decongestant, or take you to the doctor. About one in five seniors reports being isolated, Jamison said.

Still another line of research suggests that loneliness and isolation doubles the risk of Alzheimer’s disease in older adults by inducing changes in the brain that are not yet well understood.

“Humans evolved to live in social groups, and we’re most comfortable when we feel part of a group — more relaxed, happier, with lower blood pressure and cortisol levels,” Waite said.

Along with the coming campaign, the AARP Foundation plans an initiative called Connect2Affect that will highlight research on loneliness and innovative attempts to address the issue.