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Senior loneliness, isolation in the spotlight, just in time for the holidays

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Edna Little, a licensed practical nurse, volunteered with shut-in seniors after she retired. But she never really understood how the people she cared for could be lonely. Until she became one of them.

After cardiac bypass surgery eight years ago, her health eventually faded to the point where she spent long days alone in her Fort Lauderdale home watching television. No more church choir, civic group meetings, trips with friends.

“Looking at these four walls all day, it gets to you,” said Little, 83, who ended up seeing a doctor for depression. “That loneliness ... you know everyone loves you and cares for you. But sometimes you get that feeling that they are tired of you being around. You just want to crawl off somewhere into a hole and die.”

Too often considered just a fact of life for seniors, the issue of isolation and loneliness is a big one for the AARP Foundation and other advocacy groups.

In fact, the foundation is kicking off an initiative this month, during what can be a difficult holiday season for seniors, to confront what it says is an isolation epidemic affecting 8 million older adults nationwide.

“We want people to understand the problem — and the size of the problem,” said Emily Allen, the AARP Foundation’s senior vice president of programs.

AARP launched Connect2Affect.org, an online tool where people can learn what leads to elder isolation and how to build social networks, as well as post their stories about loneliness. The site also has a self-assessment checklist that can screen for someone’s risk of becoming socially isolated or depressed. Though older adults may not be cyber savvy, online tools can be used by their family members and younger seniors, those who work with seniors say.

The goal is to raise awareness about isolation and loneliness as a public health issue that can affect physical as well as mental health. An AARP study last year showed that the effects of prolonged social isolation equaled smoking 15 cigarettes a day, Allen said.

Physicians don’t routinely screen older patients about their emotional well-being or isolation, according to senior advocates. There is little funding for programs specifically targeting isolation and loneliness, they say. And often seniors themselves, or their families, don’t want to admit it’s a problem.

Facing isolation's risks is especially critical in South Florida, local advocates say, as many older residents left their families and friends behind when they chose a sunny retirement.

"People move here thinking of it as an extended vacation," said Jeff Johnson, AARP's Florida director. "They don't go out and make friends with the next unit because making friends isn't what you do on vacation. When a spouse passes away, or they lose their few close friends, then they have no support."

Rates of disability and living alone are key factors in triggering isolation.

About a third of residents age 65 and older in Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties are disabled, according to the latest projections from the 2010 Census. Women age 75 and older are particularly at risk, with more than half of those in Broward and Miami-Dade counties being disabled.

In Palm Beach County, 41 percent of people age 65 and older live alone, with 38 percent living by themselves in Broward and 32 percent in Miami-Dade.

The AARP Foundation's latest effort is part of its mission to explore how four factors impact quality of life for those 50 and older. These are hunger, income, housing and isolation. The foundation is partnering with other nonprofits or research groups on isolation projects, including the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

The association has prepared an "Expanding Your Circles" brochure that includes AARP's Connect2Affect isolation risk checklist and tips for preventing loneliness.

It also runs the federally funded Eldercare Locator, a nationwide information and referral system. Each year, the locator does a "Home for the Holidays" campaign, giving tips on how to discuss sensitive senior issues (such as what age to stop driving) during a time when families are more likely to gather. Loneliness is featured in this year's campaign, which runs through January, for the first time.

"We suspect this problem to continue or even worsen as our population grows older," association spokeswoman Dallas Jamison said. "We want people to know they can go to the Eldercare Locator and learn how they can get help."

Among the services featured in the Locator system is Senior Companions, a nationwide program run by various local social service agencies. Seniors who are age 55 or older, and on a limited income, receive a \$2.65 hourly, tax-free stipend to regularly visit other seniors who are unable to leave their homes.

Impact Broward COO Diane Smith, whose nonprofit agency manages Senior Companions in Broward County, said the program eases loneliness both for the companions, who find worth and meaning in the work, and for those being cared for.

"Isolation is a killer," Smith said. "Even if people can connect through technology, it's not the same. The best part of our program is you have a person you can look forward to seeing."

Retired nurse Little started as an Impact Broward Senior Companion 15 years ago. She began receiving the services herself a year ago as her own health declined. Although her daughter lives with her, Little said she is alone most of the day.

She now looks forward to her companion Lanie Harris' visits four days a week. Harris makes her lunch, Little said, and then they'll sit on the porch or watch TV game shows together.

"I feel better emotionally," said Little, one of 456 Broward seniors served by the program last year. "That darkness doesn't get a hold of me anymore."

In addition to providing services, agencies are hoping for more research on isolation and loneliness, given what it might mean to public health-care costs.

University of Georgia research, released last year, looked at 3,530 people age 60 and older and found those who reported being chronically lonely had more doctor visits. A 2012 University of California-San Francisco study said older adults who described themselves as lonely have a 59 percent greater risk of functional decline and a 45 percent greater risk of death.

Isolated seniors who call the Elder Helpline, managed in Palm Beach County by Your Aging & Disability Resource Center, usually ask about rides to the doctor or obtaining home-delivered meals rather than just saying they're lonely, said helpline director Kim Clawson.

"It's revealed when you're having the conversation with them and you realize they live alone, or don't have a lot of friends or support," said Clawson.

The resource center, which serves five counties, has about 6,000 people on the waiting list for services, which is 1,000 more people than the previous year. About half of them are living alone and 68 percent are women, Clawson said.

She thinks there is a need for isolation awareness programs, like the AARP initiative and "Home for the Holidays," so people will reach out to help their lonely neighbors and seniors will know there are programs to help them cope.

One is PEARLS (Program to Encourage Active, Rewarding Lives for Seniors), created by the University of Washington to ease depression among epilepsy patients and older adults. The Aging and Disability Resource Center of Broward County, Broward's Elderly and Veterans Services Division and the Mental Health Association of Palm Beach County all started PEARLS programs this year.

The mental health association's counselors have been going to senior centers, retirement communities and assisted living facilities, making presentations and trying to identify seniors who might be at risk, said CEO Pam Gionfriddo. Participants can receive free one-on-one sessions that help them become better problem-solvers and set goals for leading happier, healthier lives.

Gionfriddo said getting recruits "has been harder than we expected." So far, about 30 people have gone through or are in PEARLS.

"People just don't want to talk about it. It's sad," she said. "People should not have to suffer at any point, but especially not after they have lived a long and healthy life."

For more information about the AARP Foundation's senior isolation initiative: Connect2Affect.org or 800-775-6776.

To reach the Eldercare Locator for help connecting with local senior services: Eldercare.gov or 800-677-1116.