



What Can We do to Combat Loneliness Before it Kills Us?

There has been a growing concern across our country about the perils of loneliness and social isolation, particularly for older adults. In a 2015 Study in *Journal Perspectives on Psychological Science* research shows that lacking social connections is as damaging to our health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.

Social isolation is becoming a growing epidemic with dire physical, mental and emotional consequences. Research shows that for those who feel lonely, there is a heightened risk of premature death. Loneliness is attributed to accelerating cognitive decline, stroke risk, heart disease, high blood pressure, disrupted sleep patterns, altered immune systems, and higher levels of stress hormones. “Loneliness is a huge issue we don’t talk enough about,” states Dr. Charlotte Yeh, Chief Medical Officer of AARP services. “There is a huge stigma.”

As a caregiver, I was aware that my mother was becoming more isolated. Macular degeneration made her wary of new environments and loss of driving kept her more home-bound and dependent on others. Her move to a retirement village where there were daily interactions and activities and where she could feel safe addressed concerns of loneliness – or so I thought. Although it was a good option as a living arrangement, what I did not take into account was that she continued to experience losses of friends recently made, whether through death, illness, or a move to a more appropriate setting when needs increased. She began to hesitate in forming closer relationships and chose to spend more time alone in her room.

My mother was fortunate in that she had no cognitive losses. However, many of her fellow residents did and it became more difficult to share common interests. Maintaining connections was a work in progress which required oversight and sometimes intervention on my part. This social isolation had not been anticipated and took me by surprise. Being alone and being lonely can happen even when surrounded by people.



Caregiver Resources:

Our Family Caregiver Specialists have identified concerns & questions that are commonly discussed in support groups and counseling sessions. Check our blog at **www.nselder.org** for our monthly Caregiver topic. We'll provide you with some resources & options for handling specific issues.

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Kathy Perrella, Family Caregiver Support Specialist, discussed what she commonly sees in caregivers. “In our support groups we stress the importance of taking care of yourself, the caregiver. It is important for the mental health of the caregiver that they speak to people and get out. Many of the caregivers in the group report that it takes great effort to avoid social isolation. It is easy to get into a rut, give up and isolate yourself, especially when you’re tired from lack of sleep, depressed about your situation and overwhelmed with the responsibility of it all. Isolation can escalate all the other problems and leads to a vicious cycle that is not healthy. Some of the suggestions from the caregivers to avoid this loneliness and social isolation is to seek out help, utilize day care programs, and planned social events like the memory cafes, support groups and even on line resources. One caregiver reports that after she drops off her husband at the day care, she joins her Zumba class at the council on aging. “The group of people attending the class are fun and energetic; it’s a great way to start my day.”

Whether it is the loneliness of a loved one or your own struggle with loneliness as a caregiver, there is good news in that regardless of what your loneliness is as a result of, it is a common and curable circumstance. We can take steps to maintain and strengthen our ties to family and friends, expand our social circles and become more involved in our communities.

Here are some actions to consider taking to stay connected;

1. Volunteer to help others. NSES as an example, has many volunteer opportunities you can find out more about on our website at <http://nselder.org/about-our-volunteers-2/>
2. If you are a non-driver, don’t stop being active. Find out about transportation options through your Councils on Aging.
3. Nurture existing relationships; invite people to visit or to an event.
4. Schedule a time each day to call a friend or visit someone.
5. Stay physically active and join a group exercise.
6. Visit your local Council on Aging and participate in any of the many activities offered.
7. Check out faith-based organizations for activities and spiritual engagement.
8. Use social media like Facebook to connect and stay in touch.
9. Take a class to learn something new and meet people.
10. Get involved in an old hobby and connect with others who share the same interests.

There are some excellent resources which address the topic of loneliness for the elderly. The following link is a great article that includes some very specific ways to help alleviate loneliness for your loved one. I especially like the suggestion to connect with loved ones by allowing them to teach you something...to pass a portion of their hard-earned knowledge on. <https://www.agingcare.com/Articles/loneliness-in-the-elderly-151549.htm>

The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) launched a national campaign in collaboration with AARP on the topic of loneliness. You can access a quick Self-Assessment tool to determine if you are being affected by isolation at this link, <http://www.n4a.org/Files/Isolation%20BrochureFINAL.pdf>

To read the blog in it’s entirety go to www.nselder.org

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