

Understanding Loneliness and Social Isolation

How To Stay Connected

From the National Institute on Aging at NIH



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Use the Table of Contents to help you find things quickly. Page 19 has a list of resources for more information about loneliness and social isolation. We also put some medical terms in bold, such as **inflammation**. You can find how to say these words and what they mean in the “Words To Know” section on page 22.

Introduction

Relationships with family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues play a critical role in a person's health and overall well-being. However, as people age, they often find themselves spending more time alone. This booklet will help you learn about loneliness and social isolation. You'll find out more about how a lack of social connection can affect your health and what you can do to stay connected.

This booklet will help you learn:

- What loneliness and social isolation are
- The impact loneliness and social isolation can have on health
- Certain factors that may increase your risk for loneliness and social isolation
- How to stay connected

Marvin's Story



After working for 35 years as a teacher, Marvin looked forward to an active retirement with his wife, Sandra. For many years, they enjoyed traveling, spending time with their grandchildren, and socializing with friends. Then Sandra developed breast cancer and died. Marvin had a difficult time coping with her death and didn't feel like socializing with their friends or going out to do things on his own.

What Are Loneliness and Social isolation?

The number of adults age 65 and older is growing, and many are socially isolated and regularly feel lonely.

Social isolation and loneliness are different, but related. **Social isolation** is the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly. **Loneliness** is the distressing feeling of being alone or separated. It's possible to feel lonely even if you live and interact with other people. It's also possible to live alone and not feel lonely or socially isolated.

Older adults are at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness due to changes in health and social connections that can come with growing older. These include:

- Hearing, vision, and memory loss
- Physical disability and trouble getting around
- Loss of family or friends

How Can Being Socially Isolated or Feeling Lonely Affect a Person's Health?

Studies show that loneliness and social isolation are associated with higher risks for certain health problems. People who are socially isolated or lonely are more likely to be admitted to a nursing home or the emergency room. Social isolation and loneliness also are associated with higher risks for:

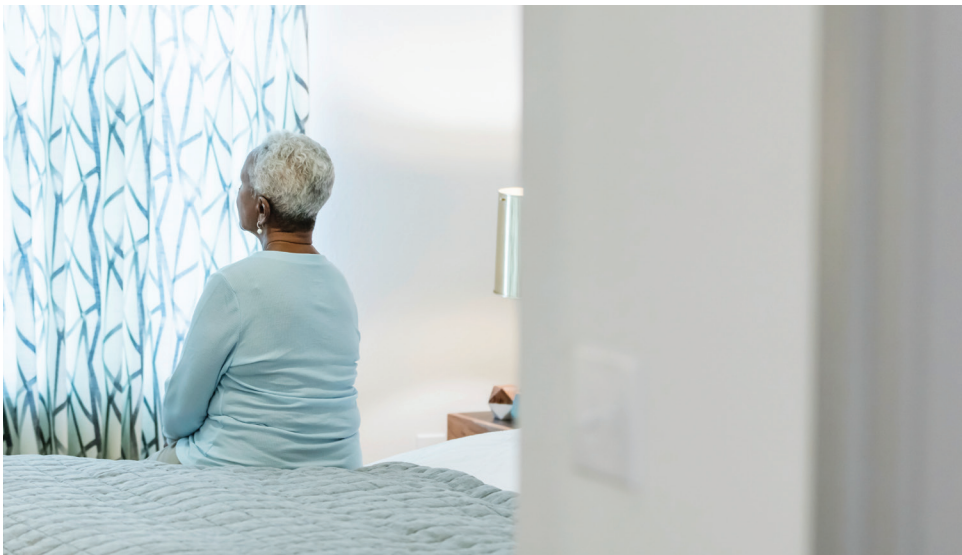
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Obesity
- Weakened immune functioning
- Anxiety
- Depression
- **Cognitive decline**
- **Dementia, including Alzheimer's disease**
- Death

People who are lonely or socially isolated may not get enough exercise, drink too much alcohol, smoke, and may not sleep well. These problems can increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and other serious conditions.

People who are lonely experience emotional pain. Losing a sense of connection and community can change the way a person sees the world. Someone experiencing **chronic** loneliness can feel threatened and mistrustful of others.

Emotional pain can activate the same stress responses in the body as physical pain. When this goes on for a long time, it can lead to chronic **inflammation** and reduced **immunity**. These changes can raise a person's risk of chronic diseases and can leave a person more vulnerable to certain infectious diseases.

Social isolation and loneliness may also be bad for brain health. These have been linked to poorer cognitive function and higher risk for dementia, including Alzheimer's. Also, too little social activity and being alone often may make it more difficult to perform everyday tasks such as driving, paying bills, taking medicine, and cooking.



Tips for Staying Connected if You Are Living Alone With Dementia

If you or a loved one has dementia and lives alone, family members, friends, or other caregivers may be able to help in different ways.

- Identify a person you trust, such as a neighbor, who can visit you regularly in person or via a video call, and be an emergency contact.
- Learn about home- and community-based support and services from social service agencies, local non-profits, and Area Agencies on Aging.
- Stay connected with family and friends through visits, video chats, email, and social media. If you're not tech-savvy, ask for help to learn.
- Talk with others who share common interests. Try a support group online or in person. Maybe your community has a memory café you can visit — a safe place to enjoy activities and socialize for people living with memory loss and their families and caregivers.

Elena's Story



Elena has been her father Oscar's caregiver ever since he was first diagnosed with Alzheimer's. As her father's disease has worsened, Elena finds that he needs more help with everyday tasks. She has been helping him with bathing and dressing, taking him to the doctor, and preparing his meals. While she feels lucky to be caring for her father, Elena often feels overwhelmed and distant from her friends. She no longer has time to spend with them and is often too tired to do so even if she could.

How Do I Know if I Am at Risk?

Certain factors may increase your risk of loneliness and social isolation. These include:

- Loss of mobility
- Vision or hearing problems
- Psychological or cognitive challenges
- Feeling a lack of purpose
- Financial struggles
- Living alone
- Lack of transportation
- Inability to leave home without help
- A major life change, such as the death of a family member or retirement
- Separation from friends or family
- Lack of social support
- Caring for a loved one who is unwell
- Living in a rural, unsafe, or hard-to-reach neighborhood
- Experiencing discrimination based on age, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, or gender identity
- Language barriers

Hearing Loss Can Make It Harder To Stay Connected



People with hearing loss may find it hard to have conversations with friends and family. Older people who can't hear well may become depressed or withdrawn from others because they feel frustrated or embarrassed about not understanding what is being said. Sometimes, older adults are mistakenly thought to be confused, unresponsive, or uncooperative when the reality is that they don't hear well.

Difficulties communicating with others can lead to less interaction with people, social isolation, and higher rates of loneliness.

Hearing problems that are ignored or untreated can get worse. If you think you might have a hearing problem, talk with a doctor. Hearing aids, therapy, certain medicines, and surgery are some of the treatments that can help. Read more at www.nia.nih.gov/hearing-loss.

Talking With Your Doctor

If you are feeling isolated or lonely, you may want to talk with your doctor or another health professional. Your doctor may ask you about your physical, emotional, and mental health. Describing your symptoms and concerns can help your doctor identify the problem. For example, let your doctor know about any major changes or stresses in your life, such as a divorce or the death of a loved one.

As we grow older, we may lose people in our lives, including spouses and cherished friends. Or, we may have to move away from home or give up favorite activities. A doctor who knows about your losses is better able to understand how you are feeling. They can make suggestions that may be helpful to you. Get tips for talking with your doctor at www.nia.nih.gov/twyd.



Grief, Mourning, and Depression



Social isolation and loneliness may arise during difficult life events and struggles with mental health. But later life does not have to be a time of ongoing sadness or disconnection.

Let your doctor know if you are struggling. Family and caring friends often can provide great support. There are also support groups where people can help each other.

Carla's Story



Since Carla started having trouble with her vision, she's had to give up driving, and she travels less often. But she still enjoys spending time with her three grandchildren, even though she lives in Maryland and they live across the country in California. Carla reads stories to them on video chat and catches up on how they are doing on social media. She also stays in touch with friends through email and weekly phone calls. Carla feels much happier knowing that she can stay connected with others.

What Can I Do To Stay Connected?

There are things you can do to protect yourself or a loved one from the effects of loneliness and social isolation. First, it's important to take care of yourself to help manage stress and stay as mentally and physically healthy as possible. Try exercising, eating a healthy diet, getting enough sleep, and pursuing activities you enjoy.

Second, it's also important to stay active and connect with others. People who engage in meaningful, productive activities they enjoy with others feel a sense of purpose and tend to live longer. Studies show these activities may help boost your mood and improve your well-being and cognitive function.

People who stay active and connected with others:

- Are less likely to develop certain diseases
- Have a longer lifespan on average
- Tend to be happier and feel less depressed
- May be better prepared to cope with loss
- May experience improved mood and cognitive function

For example, helping others through volunteering might help you feel less lonely and give you a sense of mission and purpose in life, which are linked to better health.

Here are some other ideas to help you stay connected:



- Find an activity that you enjoy, restart an old hobby, or take a class to learn something new. You might have fun and meet people with similar interests.



- Schedule time each day to stay in touch with family, friends, and neighbors. This can be in person or by email, social media, voice call, or text. Talk with people you trust and share your feelings. Suggest an activity to help nurture and strengthen existing relationships. Sending letters or cards is another good way to keep up friendships.



- Use communication technologies such as video chat or smart speakers to help keep you engaged and connected.



- If you're not tech-savvy, sign up for a class at your local public library or community center to help you learn how to use email or social media.



- Consider adopting a pet if you are able to care for one. Animals can be a source of comfort and companionship and may also lower stress and blood pressure.



- Stay physically active. Find ways to exercise with others, such as joining a walking club or working out with a friend. Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes (2 1/2 hours) of moderate-intensity activity each week.



- Introduce yourself to your neighbors.



- Find a faith-based organization where you can deepen your spirituality and engage with others in activities and events.



- Check out resources and programs at your local social service agencies, community and senior centers, and public libraries.



- Join a cause and get involved in your community.



The Benefits of Exercise

If you're feeling down, anxious, or stressed because you are lonely or socially isolated, one way to boost your mood is to get moving through exercise. Research has shown that exercise is not only good for your physical health, but it also supports emotional and mental health. You can exercise with a friend and get the added benefit of emotional support.

Physical activity can help:

- Reduce feelings of depression and stress, while improving your mood and overall emotional well-being
- Increase your energy level
- Improve sleep
- Empower you to feel more in control



In addition, exercise and physical activity may help improve or maintain some aspects of cognitive function. Whether it's gardening, playing tennis, taking a walk in the park, kicking around a soccer ball with your grandchildren, or something else, it's important to choose an activity you enjoy.

Points To Remember

- Social isolation and loneliness are related, but they aren't the same thing. Social isolation is a situation, whereas loneliness is a feeling.
- Older adults are at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness.
- Loneliness and social isolation can increase your risk for certain health problems.
- Participating in activities you enjoy and maintaining relationships can help you stay connected.

For More Information

Federal Government Resources

National Institute on Aging Information Center

800-222-2225

niaic@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov

Visit www.nia.nih.gov/health to find more health and aging information from the National Institute on Aging at NIH and subscribe to email alerts. Visit order.nia.nih.gov to order free print publications.

AmeriCorps Seniors

800-942-2677

www.americorps.gov/serve/americorps-seniors

Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116

eldercarelocator@USAging.org

eldercare.acl.gov

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General

Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection
and Community

www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/connection

Other Resources

AARP

888-687-2277

member@aarp.org

www.aarp.org/caregiving

Connect2Affect

connect2affect.org

Family Caregiver Alliance

800-445-8106

info@caregiver.org

www.caregiver.org

Meals on Wheels America

888-998-6325

info@mealsonwheelsamerica.org

www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org

National Council on Aging

571-527-3900

www.ncoa.org

SilverSneakers

866-584-7389

support@silversneakers.com

www.silversneakers.com

USAging

202-872-0888

info@uasging.org

www.usaging.org

YMCA

800-872-9622

fulfillment@ymca.net

www.ymca.org

Words To Know

Alzheimer's disease

(pronounced **allz**-high-merz duh-**zeez**)

A disease that causes large numbers of nerve cells in the brain to stop working properly and eventually die. People with this disease lose the ability to remember, think, and make good judgments. The symptoms begin slowly and get worse over time.

Chronic

(pronounced **kron**-ik)

A condition that continues for a long time or recurs over time.

Cognitive decline

(pronounced **kog**-ni-tiv dih-**klahyn**)

A medical condition that causes people to have more memory problems than other people their age. Signs may include forgetting to go to events and appointments, and having more trouble coming up with the right words than other people the same age.

Dementia

(pronounced duh-**men**-shuh)

A loss of cognitive functioning. This includes changes to a person's thinking, remembering, reasoning, and behavior that make daily life and activities difficult to manage.

Immunity

(pronounced ih-**myoo**-ni-tee)

The ability to resist or fight off an infectious disease .

Inflammation

(pronounced in-fluh-**mey**-shuhn)

Inflammation includes heat, swelling, and redness caused by the body's protective response to injury or infection. Inflammation that occurs in healthy tissues or lasts too long can be harmful.

Loneliness

(pronounced **lohn**-lee-nes)

The distressing feeling of being alone or separated.

Social isolation

(pronounced **soh**-shuhl ahy-suh-**ley**-shuhn)

The lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly.





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