Alone or Lonely?

Social isolation and loneliness in older adults

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• Board member, Meals on Wheels People
Objectives

• Compare and contrast social isolation and loneliness
• Build frameworks for social and pathophysiological drivers and consequences of loneliness
• List options available to help address loneliness
43% of seniors feel lonely on a regular basis.

There is a 45% increased risk of mortality in seniors who report feeling lonely.

Loneliness is more dangerous than obesity and as damaging to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Described by US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy in 2018

Lives alone on his ranch in Manzanita, OR
Companion lives in McMinnville, drives to visit her twice a week
Kids live out of state, talks to them rarely
Goes days without seeing or talking to anyone “except my animals”
Lives alone in a manufactured home in Tigard, OR with adult kids that live in the surrounding suburbs. Husband died 2 years ago but her longtime neighbors have been visiting and bringing food & gossip to her home regularly. Kids and grandkids visit every few weeks, family is planning for a trip to the coast. Still working in her garden every day.

Charlotte
Who should we be more concerned about?
With gentle pressing, she slowly described feeling “disconnected” from her family & friends. Neighbors often gather at her house to visit but Charlotte doesn’t really consider them close friends. Feels like she lost her confidant when her husband died. Doesn’t want to burden her kids or grandkids.
Social Isolation

Objective state of few social connections, contacts and/or relationships

Loneliness

Subjective feeling of being alone, regardless of number of social contacts

FIGURE S-1 Social connection as a multifactorial construct including structural, functional, and quality components.

Isolation and Loneliness

- 43% of older Americans report feeling lonely\(^1\)
- 24% of older adults are socially isolated\(^1\)
- 1 in 3 report lacking companionship\(^2\)
- 28% of older Americans live alone\(^3\)

2. National Poll on Healthy Aging, 2019
3. 2017 Profile of Older Americans, Administration for Community Living
Both social isolation and loneliness are associated with physical and mental health conditions.
50% increased risk for dementia

Higher rates of clinically significant depression, anxiety and suicide

29% increased risk for heart disease, 32% increased risk for stroke

59% increased risk for functional decline & falls

29% increased risk of dying
25% increased risk of dying from cancer

FIGURE 2-2  Odds of decreased mortality for indicators of social connection relative to leading health indicators.

NOTES: Odds (InOR) or Hazards (InHR). Effect size of zero indicates no effect. The effect sizes were estimated from meta-analyses: A = Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; B = Shavelle et al., 2008; C = Critchley and Capewell, 2003; D = Holman et al., 1996; E = Shor et al., 2012; F = Fine et al., 1994; G = Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; H = Katzmarzyk et al., 2003; I = Flegal et al., 2013; J = Schwartz, 1994.
Understanding isolation and loneliness

Building a diagnostic framework
Isolation & Loneliness are Geriatric Syndromes

- Multi-factorial conditions of older adults resulting from the interaction between patient specific factors and situation specific stressors
  - Characterized by multiple underlying contributors (medical and psychosocial) and organ systems

- Carry risks of functional impairment, frailty and death

Isolation and loneliness always evolve from more than one driver
Medical Considerations

- Sensory impairments – vision, hearing
- Cognitive & behavioral conditions – dementias, strokes, brain injuries, mental health conditions
- Communication impairments – aphasias
- Incontinence
- Uncontrolled symptoms, medication side effects
Functional Considerations

• Retirement from driving, reliance on others for transportation
• Need for hands on ADL care, frailty
• Physical inability to navigate – spaces that can’t accommodate an assistive device
Social / Environmental Considerations

- Physical distance from family & friends
- Death of a spouse / partner
- Outliving contemporaries
- Retirement / loss of employment
- Lack of volunteer, employment opportunities
- Decline of civic engagement – unions, social clubs, worship service attendance
- Caregiver role
- Societal stigma, systematized ageism
One of the last socially acceptable biases

STOP AGEISM

One of the last socially acceptable biases
Understanding isolation and loneliness

Assessment
Assessing isolation & loneliness

- THE KEY IS TO ASK!

- 3-item UCLA Loneliness Scale

  **UCLA loneliness scale**
  1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
  2. How often do you feel left out?
  3. How often do you feel isolated from others?*

- AARP online version – www.connect2affect.org
Assessing isolation & loneliness

• The power of small talk
  – Start visits with social history / ”what’s new”

• Include isolation & loneliness in routine ROS
  – Make it routine to ask how often people leave their homes, spend time with others, feel lonely
  – On par with asking about other geriatric syndromes
Assessing isolation & loneliness

- The power of small talk
  - Start visits with social history / ”what’s new”
Addressing isolation and loneliness
Engage

- Take an extra moment to talk and share
- Say hello, share a compliment

Connect

- Address underlying drivers
- Explore ways to connect to community, leverage community programs
Focus on underlying drivers

- Hearing assist devices, vision enhancing devices
- Occupational, Speech Therapy – clear goal to help reduce barriers to meaningful social contact
- Scheduled toileting to better manage urinary leaking

- Focus on What Matters
Connecting to community

- Area Agencies on Aging / Aging & Disability Resource Connection – county based agencies
  - Peer support & visitor programs, etc
- Senior Loneliness Line – 503 200 1633
- Senior & community centers, libraries
- Patient & family groups
  - Alzheimer’s association
  - Parkinson’s Resources of Oregon
Special thanks to Dr Suvi Neukam, OHSU Geriatrics Fellow
Loneliness in the time of COVID19
Remember that a simple hello and a chat can make a difference.