Social Isolation & Loneliness in the Older Adult Patient

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Disclosures

• Suvi Neukam has no disclosures
• Laura Byerly has no disclosures
Objectives

• Define the prevalence of senior isolation and loneliness and the unique impact of COVID-19 on this condition
• Reframe your understanding of loneliness from a simple feeling to a entity with profound clinical implications
• Describe the evidence-based benefits of reducing isolation and loneliness in older adults.
• Identify local resources for combating isolation and loneliness in older adults.
Why talk about this...

• How **big** of a problem can this be?
• How **harmful** can it be?
• Why focus on this when there are SO MANY **other problems**?
• Is this **my problem** as the provider?
• What can I **do about it** anyway?

Image courtesy of MoodRaiser.com
The “lingo” of the problem

**Lonely**

- Subjective feeling of being alone
- Distress from discrepancies between ideal and perceived social relationships

**Isolated**

- Objective measurement of too few relationships/contacts
- Complete or near complete lack of contact with society
-Disconnected from family, friends and community

Discrepancy between a person’s preferred and actual level of social contact

Cacioppo and Hawkley, Trends Cogn Sci, 2009; Perissinotto et al, JAGS, 2019
“Epidemic of Loneliness”

• 43% of people age >60 in the US
• 47% of people widowed/lost partner
• Married and single, living alone or with others
• Mortality increase
  • Lonely = 26%
  • Socially isolated = 29%

Yes, it is some of your patients—even if they aren’t telling you

Isolation—by Choice or Circumstance

1 in 5 older adults
Conceptualizing the Problem

**Lonely Patients**
- Who is lonely?
- What cues you to “wonder” about loneliness in a patient?
- How do you determine if someone is lonely?
- Do we ask?

**Isolated Patients**
- What do you consider isolated”?
- What if it’s isolation by choice?
- How do you determine someone’s isolation status?
- Do we ask?
PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY AND NOT LONELY

By age, income, education, marital status, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ identification.

Note: May not sum to 100% due to rounding error.
Risk & Protective Factors

- Robust social network
- Increasing age
- Weekly or more contact with friends
- Weekly or more contact with siblings
- More hours slept per night
- Good health
- More frequent sexual activity
- More frequent participation in secular hobbies and clubs
- More frequent volunteering and religious involvement
- Depression diagnosis
- Urban community environment
- Anxiety diagnosis
- Increased use of technology for communication
- Being physically isolated

*References:
Social needs = Health needs

Socially isolated older adults are at greater risk for poor health and death than their well-connected counterparts.  

Figure courtesy of “Papa” inc.

Challenges to Health Care Costs

$6.7B

Annual additional Medicare fee-for-service spending due to social isolation

$1,608

Additional annual spent for each socially isolated older adult compared to those with typical levels of social contacts

4X INCREASE

Likelihood of lonely patients to be rehospitalized within a year of discharge

Figures courtesy of “Papa” inc.

Basic science break
How harmful could loneliness/isolation be?

• Premature mortality
  • Near equivalent to tobacco use
  • >> risk than obesity, air pollution, lack of exercise

• Frailty association
  • Highest risk of mortality when lonely/isolated

It’s all biology (and a little psychology)

• “Fight or Flight” response
  → Evolutionary mechanism
  → “Safer in groups”
  → Chronic stress reaction...

• Self-fulfilling prophecy cycle/feedback loop
  • Preservation = further isolation

_Cacioppo and Cacioppo, Soc Personal Psychol Compass, 2014_
Inflammation: Rarely a good thing

Loneliness
Elevated Cortisol
Inflammation

Decreased Immunity
Cognitive Decline
Cardiovascular Disease
And then came 2020...
Loneliness and Isolation in the COVID Era
“A sumo-stomping, ninja-popping, kung-fu leaping, all-action adventure featuring three unlikely superheroes and one surprise ending”
COVID Lessons on Loneliness & Isolation

- Age as protective factor
  - Younger students possibly highest risk
  - Overall lower indicators of loneliness
- Initial lonely burst → stability/improvement
  - 40% isolation at baseline
  - Improvement in depression and anxiety (for some)

*Table 2. Social Isolation and Loneliness Overall and by Time since Shelter-in-Place Orders (N=160 interviews)*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness due to COVID-19*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>0.009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Same or Better</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>73%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severity of Loneliness*</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bu et al, Public Health 2020; Luchetti et al, American Psychologist 75(7) 2020; Kotwal et al, JAGS 69(1) 2021
Time and time again I was struck, that despite the considerate burden of the COVID-19 pandemic and being in the high-risk mortality demographic, the patients I interacted with were weathering the shelter-in-place orders with aplomb. No panic, just determination. Personally, I am unsure if I could do the same.

--Mitch Nohner, MD (PGY2)
Interventions to Reduce Social Isolation and Loneliness
Loneliness Reduction

- # of Relationships
- Quality of Relationships
- Greatest Loneliness Reduction

Masi et al. PMID: 20716644
Mann et al. PMID: 28528389
Maladaptive Social Cognitive Skills | Social Skills
---|---
Social Support | Social Interactions

Impacting Loneliness

Masi et al. PMID: 20716644
Hearing Aids

Vision Support

Dental Issues

Urinary Incontinence
Social Skills and Maladaptive Social Skills

IRL Social Skills

HOPE Plan (Helping Older People Engage)

Van Orden et al. PMID: 32425473
Social Support Resources

- The Dougy Center
- “In This Together” through Oregon Hospice Association
- Oregon Suicide Bereavement Support

Widowed

Disease-Specific
(for pts and caregivers)

- Alzheimer’s Association
- Parkinson’s Association
- OHSU, Providence, Legacy, PeaceHealth Stroke Support Groups
- Compass Oncology Cancer Support

Care Giver Stress

- Oregon Care Partners
- Family Care Giver Alliance
- Care Giver Action Network
Social Interaction

Virtual
- Simple Companionship
- Exercise
- Volunteerism

In person
- Advocacy
- Shared-Experience
- Lifelong Learning
Social Interactions: Companionship

Oregon
- Oregon Senior Peer Outreach
- Oregon Senior Loneliness Line
- Oregon Warmline through GOBHI
- Rose City GeroPysch
- CDM Virtual Day Center
- Friendly House
- VIEWS (Volunteers Involved for the Emotional Well-Being of Seniors) *on hold due to COVID

National
- Friendship Line
- Covia’s Well Connected
- Covia’s Social Call
- Papa Pals
PapaPals

How Do Our Pals Address Loneliness?

- Appointments & Trips
- Reminders
- Personal & Habitat Safety
- Fun & Mood
- Essential Assistance
- Community Engagement

70% Improved Loneliness

Overview

1. Teach members how to use GrubHub, Instacart, Amazon, Walmart.com etc.
2. Teach members how to use their telehealth and house call benefits
3. Pick up and deliver medications/food that have been paid for
4. Provide welfare checks and prevention techniques
5. Virtual companionship in form of texting, phone calls and face to face interaction

Your loved ones are assisted
Social Interactions: In person Companionship

**Community**
- Distance and masks and.... Vaccination!
- Across the street
- Yard meet ups
- Outdoor walks
- Pod up with family? Friends?

**Facility**
- Window visits
- Outside visits (*distance and masks*)
- Live outdoor performance
- Adopt a neighbor/friend

**Surrogate “Person”**
- Robotic Pets
- Companion Pets
- Plants and Horticulture Therapy
Robotic Pets

### Decreased
- Loneliness
- Depression

### Increased
- Mental well being
- Resilience
- Purpose in life
- Optimism

### Direct Effects
- Companionship
- Sense of purpose
- Physical benefits

### Indirect Effects
- Facilitates communication with others
- Encourages leaving the home

Cost is variable: $58 - $6000

Tkatch, 2020
Hudson, 2020
Lazar, 2016
Banks, 2008
Social Interactions: Virtual Resources

- Exercise
- Volunteerism
- Advocacy
- Shared-Experience
- Continuing Education

Virtual Book Club
Group Movie Watch
Online Dinner Parties
Multiplayer Online Games
Online Concert

The Foundation of Art and Healing
AARP Connect2Affect
Age-Friendly Portland
Encore.org
The Villages
SAGE (Senior Advocates for Generational Equality)
SOAR (Sponsors Organized to Assist Refugees)
IRCO (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization)
Cascade AIDS Project (CAP)
Guardian Partners
Easter Seals
Hollywood Senior Center
Rebel Fit Club
Too Fit Too Fracture
Mittleman Jewish Community Center
YouTube Tai Chi
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9am</td>
<td>Stress Management: Jacki Gethner</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:45am</td>
<td>Life Stories Writing Workshop</td>
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<tr>
<td>11am</td>
<td>Arthritis Exercise</td>
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<tr>
<td>2pm</td>
<td>Beginning Tai Chi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thu</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9am</td>
<td>Chair Yoga</td>
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<tr>
<td>10am</td>
<td>Hollywood Senior Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:45am</td>
<td>Jacki Gethner: Arthritis Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>1pm</td>
<td>A Will is Not Enough in Hollywood</td>
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<tr>
<td>2pm</td>
<td>Intermediate Tai Chi</td>
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<tr>
<td>3pm</td>
<td>VIEWS Support Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fri</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12pm</td>
<td>FILM SCREENING - Jackie Sollis</td>
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<tr>
<td>2pm</td>
<td>Friday Afternoon Chats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3pm</td>
<td>Zumba Gold</td>
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<tr>
<td>6pm</td>
<td>AFRICAN FILM FESTIVAL</td>
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<tr>
<td>9am</td>
<td>Chair Yoga</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:45am</td>
<td>Jacki Gethner: Arthritis Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11am</td>
<td>Arthritis Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2pm</td>
<td>Beginning Tai Chi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3pm</td>
<td>VIEWS Support Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7pm</td>
<td>AFRICAN FILM FESTIVAL</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:30am</td>
<td>Poetry Power</td>
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<td>11am</td>
<td>Senior Technology Workshop</td>
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<td>2pm</td>
<td>Friday Afternoon Chats</td>
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<td>3pm</td>
<td>Zumba Gold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6pm</td>
<td>SAGE's Valentine's Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>7pm</td>
<td>AFRICAN FILM FESTIVAL</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Social Interactions: Virtual Resources

Exercise
- Hollywood Senior Center
- Rebel Fit Club
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Volunteerism
- AARP
- Connect2Affect
- Age-Friendly Portland
- Encore.org
- The Villages

Advocacy

Shared-Experience

Continuing Education
Volunteerism Feature: Age Friendly Portland

Education! Conservation! Financial Assistance! Homelessness! Peer Counseling! Food Security! Environmentalism! Parks and Rec! Clothing! Transportation! Retail! Health Care! Youth Engagement! IT!

Albertina’s Place
Albertina’s Place takes money for Albertina and empowering people with substance and developmental disabilities, mental health challenges, and other social barriers to lead self-determined lives and reach their full potential. We operate a restaurant and a retail shop with volunteers. Opportunities include: front of house/service, kitchen/soda person, media/entertainment specialist, flower arrangement/ reservation pony! Please visit our volunteering website to learn more.

Bigs & Little Clubs of Portland
Contributing your time is a powerful way to support the youth in your community. We have over 30 clubs all over the city run by very passionate volunteers, creating meaningful mentorships, and making young people’s dreams come true. We have over 50 clubs all over the city run by very passionate volunteers, creating meaningful mentorships, and making young people’s dreams come true. We are flexible and offer opportunities to volunteer in a variety of ways. Please visit our volunteering website to learn more.

Cedar Sinai Park and Jordan Family and Child Service
Volunteer opportunities at Cedar Sinai Park include: special events, general support, maintenance, and child care. We have over 50 clubs all over the city run by very passionate volunteers, creating meaningful mentorships, and making young people’s dreams come true. Please visit our volunteering website to learn more.

Check Us Out

Volunteering with OHSU is a great opportunity to volunteer with children in your community. We serve primarily in urban children who need help with their health. You can help us reach our goal of 200 hours of volunteering per month. Please visit our volunteering website to learn more.

Friends of Baltimore Woods
We’re looking for volunteers to help with our annual tree sale in the fall. Our tree sales help us support our programs and services. Please visit our volunteering website to learn more.

Friends of Trees
We have great volunteer opportunities throughout the year that include planting, tending, and maintaining trees. Please visit our volunteering website to learn more.

OHSU
Our volunteer programs, training opportunities and education opportunities span across multiple disciplines and locations. We are looking for volunteers to help with a variety of tasks. Please visit our volunteering website to learn more.

Environmentalists
We have great volunteer opportunities throughout the year that include planting, tending, and maintaining trees. Please visit our volunteering website to learn more.
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- Cascade AIDS Project (CAP)
- Guardian Partners
- Easter Seals

Shared-Experience

Continuing Education

Continuing Education
Advocacy Feature: SAGE

Bruce: former Senior Director at TriMet
Giving Forward: teaches young adults accountability, respect and integrity through mentorship.

“Establishing trust with a mentee takes time, but the payoff is worth the investment”

Roberta: retired social worker and teacher
Giving Forward: inspired to protect local land planned for development; now building a public park for her hometown

“Make the best of every day”

Jeanne: retired communications director of the Oregon School Board Association
Giving Forward: helps students obtain scholarships, grants and backpacks.

“Investing in our kids is what really counts”

Lori: retired marketeer
Giving Forward: teaches business skills to Millennials

“Working side-by-side with young professional is more fun than you can imagine—I’m a better person for it!”
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Shared-Experience
- Virtual book club
- Group movie watch
- Online dinner parties
- Multiplayer online games
- Online concert
- The Foundation of Art and Healing

Continuing Education
- OHSU
Shared Experience Feature: Foundation for Art & Healing

- Aging UnLonely
- UnLonely Film Festival
- Stuck at Home (together)
  - Creativity challenges, playlists, story share
- Black Health and the Arts

“We’re all on an individual journey, but somehow we all have so much more in common than we ever realized. That realization came to me through this creative process.”
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Continuing Education
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- SelfHelp’s Virtual Senior Center
- Covia’s Well Connected
Learning Feature:
Covia Well Connected

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What are Participants Saying?

“If I didn’t have this computer, I don’t know if I’d still be alive”

“Before X I was bored to death. Now I am alive again”

“You learn stuff. It’ll make you happy. I don’t know what we’d do without it.”

“When I started, everyone was a stranger to me. Now we are friends. We are family.”
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- Covia’s Well Connected
Plug for “Eudemonic Well Being”

- Decreased Sense of Purpose
  - Functional Decline
  - Increased Risk of Institutionalization
  - Cognitive Decline
  - Increased Risk of Mortality
The Social Rx

**Friends-rosemide:** Call your granddaughter for 30 minutes daily

**Am(not)lonely-pine:** participate in book group first Monday of every month

Refill ______ times ___________________________, M.D.
DEA NO. ___________________ Address ___________________________
Summary

• Senior isolation and loneliness are significant issues that impact more than a third of older adults and COVID19 has had a mixed impact
• The state of being lonely is more than just an adjective. Loneliness impacts: mortality, cognition, function.
• It’s about quality and quantity (of connections)!
• Make your patients want to get out of bed!
• Prescribe social interventions as strongly as you would a medicine!
Thank you!

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byerlyla@ohsu.edu