



STAYING CONNECTED: THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

“I really miss having a close circle of friends. My husband and closest friends have died, my kids and grandkids have moved away, and I’ve retired from work and volunteering. I’m alone a lot and can’t seem to find anyone I can really talk to now.” — Sadie, 81-year-old

Many older adults have fewer social interactions and fewer supportive relationships than in their younger years. If you are alone most of the time—a state known as *social isolation*—or if you frequently feel lonely—a condition known as *emotional isolation*—this can have serious health consequences and/or can lead to an overall lack of well-being. The good news is that isolation can be reduced or eliminated, and your quality-of-life improved.

What is Social and Emotional Isolation?

Social isolation is when you have very little or no social contact so you lack supportive, satisfying, or rewarding relationships in life. For some, this means not having people to do things with, whether going out to lunch or the movies, discussing books or current events, or walking in the park. For others, this isolation may mean not having anyone to help out with shopping, cooking, or other daily needs. Still, for others, social isolation may mean not having anyone checking in to make sure everything is okay, leaving the older person worried about who to turn to should an emergency arise.

Emotional isolation is a feeling that can range from a vague sense that there is something missing in life to an intense sensation of emptiness. It is a longing for a close relationship, someone to converse with in a meaningful way, someone with whom you can share your deepest joys, desires and fears, someone to touch and be touched by. When experiencing emotional isolation, you may believe that no one cares about you or that nobody needs you in his or her life. This can lead to depression, anxiety and to further isolation.

How Can I Tell If I Am Isolated?

In general, if you are isolated you may feel something is missing in your life but you may not know how to change your circumstances or rebuild your social life. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you have someone to turn to when you need something, e.g., going to the store for food or medicine when you have the flu, moving a box that is too heavy for you to lift, or filling out a form you do not understand?
- Do you have someone to turn to in times of crisis, e.g., to take you to the hospital, to take care of your pet if you have to leave home, or to call if your wallet is stolen and you have no money to get home?
- Do you have someone with whom you can share your happiness, sadness, dreams, and worries?
- Overall, do you feel satisfied with how often you are with people and the quality of those relationships?

If you answer **YES** to all of these questions, chances are **you are not isolated**. If you answer **NO** to all of these questions, chances are **you are experiencing isolation**. *(Please note: If you find that the reason you are able to answer “yes” to these questions is because you rely on the same one or two people for assistance and support, this is a sign that your network is dangerously small.)*

How Does Isolation Happen?

Isolation, particularly for an older person, can happen either gradually or suddenly. There are many factors that can contribute to becoming isolated, including:

- **Loss of family and friends.** Many older adults outlive relatives and friends. Each loss reduces their support and social opportunities.
- **Increased health problems and mobility issues.** As an older person’s overall health and ability to get around begin to deteriorate, social networks can diminish as well.
- **Financial pressures.** Changes in work status, dependence on retirement benefits, and living on a fixed income can limit a person’s ability to afford things previously enjoyed, e.g. taking vacations, traveling, eating at restaurants, going to the movies or the theater.

- **Changes in living arrangements.** When older people move to new living environments or live for the first time without a partner, their social networks and support systems are often affected. For some, not having familiar routines and contacts can cause them to retreat and spend most of their time alone.
- **Abuse by family members.** Sometimes a relative can cause harm—physically, financially, or emotionally—and want to keep the older person isolated from others so that no one finds out, leaving the older person vulnerable to further harm.

What Impact Can Isolation Have?

A sense of belonging and purpose is important to a good quality of life. According to several national studies, older people who have regular social contacts and close relationships live longer, cope better with health conditions such as heart problems, and have less depression and anxiety. Isolation over a period of time can reduce your quality of life. The following areas in your life can be affected by isolation:

- **Mental Health.** Isolation can cause or worsen significant mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, low self-worth, a lack of purpose, and/or hopelessness. These emotional difficulties, in turn, can create deeper isolation further reducing the likelihood of professional assistance or recovery.
- **Physical Health.** Whether coping with a chronic medical problem or an emergency medical crisis, the support and companionship of another person can help with recovery. For example, a support person can help make phone calls to doctors, get prescriptions filled and renewed, assist with managing medical bills, and help alleviate fears that may arise from having health problems. When isolated, there are fewer people on whom to rely, and this then jeopardizes the older person's health.
- **Functional Abilities.** The ability to do things for oneself may become limited due to health problems. A support system can help provide assistance with activities such as food shopping, coordinating help in the home, or assisting during a time of illness. It may be difficult to maintain independent living without such a support system. Thus, older individuals experiencing isolation are at increased risk of nursing home placement.

What Can I Do to Reduce or Eliminate Isolation?

You can take steps to overcome isolation. The best remedy to combat isolation is to get involved with other people and form meaningful new relationships. Even if this feels difficult to do forming relationships can improve the quality of your life and your well-being. The following are some suggestions that may help you in this effort:

- **Take Advantage of Learning Opportunities.** Being interested in the world around you and choosing to learn more about something that you are curious about can stimulate your mind. This can also have social benefits, like meeting new people, having meaningful conversations with friends and family, and sharing knowledge with others. More and older adults are taking computer classes to become computer literate to connect with others using e-mail, joining on-line support groups, and participating in chat rooms or message boards. Many Web sites are geared to older adults and provide general information about health, money and retirement. In addition, many public libraries, hospitals, and community colleges offer computer workshops and lectures.
- **Use Encouraging Self-Talk.** Try developing a positive attitude by recognizing thoughts that are negative and replacing them with something positive. For example, if you think, “I’m too old and tired to make new friends,” the chances are small that you will succeed in meeting people. Try changing that idea to a more positive thought, such as, “I can choose to stay active and interested in people, as many older people do. By making new friends, I’ll have someone to do things with, and hopefully have support when I need help.” This new attitude will be more motivating, and will keep you open to exploring social possibilities.
- **Make it a Goal to Get Connected.** Perhaps you can set a goal one day to find out about places in your community that you can go to do an activity you have enjoyed in the past. This can be something like playing cards, discussing books, or doing crafts. The following day’s goal could be to check out at least one of the places you found out about. The next day you could explore another resource, and so on.
- **Take Care of Yourself.** Physical activity (e.g. walking, yoga, or working out with hand weights) can improve your mental attitude

and can have a positive impact on your health. If you exercise with a friend or meet someone new while exercising you can benefit from having regular social contacts while doing a physical activity.

- **Get a Pet.** Having a pet can provide you with companionship, give you something to nurture, and provide you with opportunities to meet others. For example, if the pet is a dog that needs to be walked several times a day, you will have a reason to go out and you can work on developing conversations and connections with other dog walkers.
- **Become Involved in Social, Volunteer, and/or Work Activities.** Connecting with others through activities can give you a renewed sense of purpose and hope. A church, synagogue, mosque, local senior center, clubs, or other organizations often sponsor activities and opportunities to get involved. By participating in social or civic activities you are more likely to develop interests, experience enjoyment, and find people whom you would like to get to know. When you give to others by volunteering you are likely to feel better about yourself for being useful. Going back to work full or part-time can provide you with a social network, give you additional income, and provide an opportunity for you to use your skills. If you are homebound, some localities have opportunities to connect with people through group conference calls.
- **Explore Housing Options.** Your current living situation may be familiar and comfortable, but if you are isolated, it may be better for your overall well-being to consider a living environment that provides easy and frequent opportunities to interact with others including the option of dining with others. Assisted living or continuing care communities are designed just for this purpose.
- **Consider Adult Day Communities.** Those isolated due to dementia may wish to consider community-based adult day programs designed for people with cognitive limitations. Older adults can spend the day in a supervised protective setting that offers a variety of services and the opportunity to interact and socialize with others.

Many older adults find it difficult to figure out how to put themselves in social situations that would allow for more social contact and for new relationships to form. This may be for a variety of reasons including not knowing how to start conversations and keep them going, feeling embarrassed, shy, or anxious about starting something new, or having difficulty finding the resources and

options available. If you are having trouble connecting with others for whatever reason, consider the following:

- **Talk to Your Healthcare Provider.** One possibility is to discuss your concerns and feelings with your doctor, nurse, or other health care provider so that another person can problem-solve with you. Do not wait for the provider to raise the issue with you. Explain your experience with isolation in order to get the help you need. This may feel risky, but it is one way to begin to get help.
- **Seek Counseling.** If you are experiencing feelings of isolation, consider seeking the help of a counselor. A counselor can determine if depression or anxiety is contributing to your isolation and can help with those problems. If you are uncomfortable meeting new people, a counselor can help you learn ways of interacting with others. Joining a support group is a great way to meet others with similar feelings and develop social contacts. For the homebound, some localities have counselors who will work with you in your home.
- **Obtain Help from Community Agencies or Other Resources.** Many communities have programs and services designed to provide older adults with a support network. Many older people use these programs to prevent being isolated from others. You may want to consider becoming connected with a reassurance phone call program, a friendly visiting program, or having an aide to help with daily activities or for companionship.

Where to Get Help

National Resources

Counseling

American Psychological Association (APA): Find a Psychologist. This association will ask you for your zip code to locate and connect you with the referral service of your state psychological association.

Phone: 1-800-964-2000.

Web site: locator.apa.org or www.apa.org

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW). This association provides an online search for social work therapists meeting standards determined by the NASW Competence Certification Commission.

Phone: 1-202-408-8600.

Web site: <http://www.helpstartshere.org/find-a-social-worker>

Volunteer Opportunities

Senior Corps. This federal program is a network of programs that tap the experiences of older citizens to meet community challenges. Programs include: Senior Companions, RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteers Program), and Foster Grandparents.

Phone: 1-800-424-8867 or in NYC call 1-212-442-3117.

Web site: www.seniorcorps.org

AARP Experience Corps. This program allows adults 50 years and older interested in tutoring K-3 students in disadvantaged schools who are struggling to read. Phone: Web site: www.aarp.org/experience-corps

Learning and Connections

SeniorNet Learning Centers. This computer technologies organization provides older adults free access to on-line activities such as discussions on aging related topics. Other on-line activities include chats, courses, and computer tips. There is a fee (\$40.00 for one year) to go and use a Learning Center facility, located nationwide and listed on the site.

Web site: www.seniornet.org

DOROT's University Without Walls. This extensive educational program uses telephone conference calls to reach individuals throughout the New York Metropolitan area, New Jersey, and Florida, bringing everyone together into one vibrant community. Phone: 1-212-769-2850.

Web site: www.dorotusa.org

New York Resources

Intergenerational Programs

New York City Department for the Aging. This NYC agency's activities are directed toward providing community-based intergenerational programs and services that foster independence, safety, wellness and quality of life for seniors. Phone: 1-212-442-1000 or 1-212-442-3114.

Web site: www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/html/home/home.shtml

Volunteer & Service Opportunities

ReServe, Inc. ReServe matches adults 55+ with the nonprofits that need them in exchange for a modest hourly stipend. ReServists provide direct services, administrative support, and capacity-building expertise in schools, social service agencies, cultural institutions, and public agencies. Phone: 1-212-727-4335.

Web site: www.reserveinc.org

Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of CSS has more than 4,000 volunteers 55+ at hundreds of nonprofit agencies throughout New York City. Phone: 1-212-254-8900. Web site: www.cssny.org/rsvp

Volunteer NYC. Volunteer opportunities supporting the Mayor's Volunteer Center and United Way-led programs are highlighted on this site and volunteer positions based on interests and location can be searched for. Phone: 1-212-251-2492. Web site: ww42.volunteernyc.org

Local Centers and Outreach Programs

Goddard Riverside Community Center. This program has older adults and staff reach out to the homebound through phone contacts and visits. Phone: 1-212-873-6600. Web site: www.goddard.org

The Carter Burden Center for the Aging. This organization primarily serves Manhattan's Upper East Side elders. Their services include: supportive counseling and advocacy, home visits and meals, cultural and educational programs, volunteer opportunities, and a luncheon club. Phone: 1-212-879-7400. Web site: www.carterburdencenter.org

Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Elders (SAGE). SAGE provides social services, groups, classes, social activities, outreach and advocacy to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender seniors throughout the city. Phone: 1-212-741-2247. Web site: www.sageusa.org/nyc

Visiting Neighbors. Volunteers in this organization helps older adults in parts of Manhattan and Queens alleviate loneliness and isolation by providing an opportunity for both volunteers and seniors to visit and learn from each other. Phone: 1-212-260-6200. Web site: www.visitingneighbors.org

Mental Health

CornellCARES. This website developed and maintained by Weill Medical College of Cornell University's Division of Geriatrics and Gerontology provides handouts on social and psychological issues designed for older adults. Web site: www.CornellCARES.com

This resource provides brief, general information about this health care topic. It does not take the place of specific instructions you receive from your health care providers. For answers to other questions consult your physician or other health care provider.

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