

## Take a Stand against Loneliness

By Kate McCarthy

Loneliness and feelings of isolation occasionally affect people of all ages, but among the elderly feeling alone can be devastating and destructive. According to recent studies done by the University of Michigan, over 70% of the elderly in the US suffer from feeling isolated and lonely. These negative emotions can be experienced throughout the year but may be more prominent during the winter months.



The holiday season often triggers depression among the elderly when the memories of a lost loved one or being distant from family feels more pronounced. The cold weather and the darkness associated with winter also plays a role in isolating elders from family and friends, making it more difficult to connect and be socially active. It is often through the winter months that loneliness spirals into depression. It is true that people of all ages can struggle with loneliness and may occasionally have to battle against depression, but with the elderly these feelings can actually contribute to failing health and premature mortality.

Studies have shown that loneliness among the elderly increases certain health risks such as sleep disorders, a weakened immune system, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. Doctors recently reported that lonely seniors are “more likely to suffer a decline in health or die over a six-year period than those who were content with their social lives.” In fact, recent research shows that elderly who are lonely have a 59% greater risk of declining in health and ability to function independently than those who feel connected to family, friends and society.

There are several theories regarding the relationship between loneliness and a decline in health among the elderly. It is thought that the emotional stress of being isolated releases hormones that have a negative impact on the immune system. Also, feeling lonely and unconnected causes many elderly to behave in ways that negatively affect their own health. They tend to not eat proper meals because they are eating alone and suffer from weight loss and malnutrition. Some neglect to take their medications as there is no one to remind them. Others may concentrate on whatever physical discomforts they experience and use their pain as a reason not to participate in life. Many lonely elders cling to their isolation with excuses on not wanting to bother or be a burden on anyone.

Knowing that loneliness can cause a decline in health and premature mortality should be enough to get seniors to actively combat against it. Family and friends can also help motivate those who need to get a gentle nudge to take action. There are many practical ways elders can take a stand against loneliness, help their own health and greatly increase their enjoyment in life.

- Get physical – There is a proven link between exercise and longevity. Joining an exercise class for the elderly will provide both social and physical benefits. There are many options available for all different levels of ability at the health club, the YMCA or at the local senior center.
- Get social – Join a group or club that focuses on an interest you share. The local senior center offers opportunities to participate in groups and activities of all kinds. Check out what is happening at the public library or keep an ear open for community events.
- Get connected – Learn about the internet and all the opportunities to keep connected through social media and chat groups. Even those who can't get out and about can establish a social connection via the internet.
- Get into a routine – Too much empty time breeds loneliness. Establishing a set routine gives structure to the day.
- Get instructed – Take a class in an area of interest. Seniors have the time to take up a musical instrument, dabble in a watercolor class or learn a new language. Trying something new benefits the elderly cognitively and provides an opportunity to meet new people.
- Get helpful – There are many opportunities for seniors to serve others. Volunteer to visit those who cannot get out, tutor a struggling student or help out at a shelter. There are many ways to contribute a helping hand and feeling needed is a wonderful way to combat loneliness.

The elderly who take responsibility for their own social lives are generally happier and healthier.

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