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# Loneliness and Social Isolation: A Risk Factor for Dementia

As we age, loneliness and social isolation can lead to adverse health outcomes such as depression and dementia, underscoring the importance of neighbors, community members and organizations learning about and helping those struggling with loneliness.

Just as thirst is the body's way of saying we need to hydrate, the feeling of loneliness is our signal that we need more human connection than we are getting. All of us are at risk of loneliness, but as we age we may experience more triggers for loneliness, which may lead to adverse health outcomes. Neighbors, community members and organizations can all make a difference by learning about loneliness and how to help when we see others struggling.

## Defining Social Isolation & Loneliness

Loneliness is a subjective condition defined as the gap between the social connections a person wants versus what they feel they have. Untreated loneliness can lead to social isolation, which is an objective lack of social networks and access to information and resources.

## Health Risks of Loneliness

- Persistently feeling lonely is one of the major risk factors for cognitive decline and can increase the risk of dementia by 50%.
- Loneliness can increase the risk for heart disease, stroke, depression and anxiety as well as addiction, suicidality and self-harm.
- Loneliness can inhibit social connection and sleep patterns, leading to further isolation.
- According to the CDC, some groups are at a higher risk for loneliness including low-income adults, young adults, older adults, adults living alone, people with chronic diseases and disabilities, immigrants and LGBTQ+ individuals.



## Potential Causes of Loneliness

We are all at risk for loneliness at any time, but there are a few root causes that can trigger more intense loneliness.<sup>1</sup>



### Trauma

A kind of harm that can be physical or emotional, happening suddenly or over a long time. It can be caused by stressful events like war, sexual assault, terrorism, childhood abuse, natural disasters, mass shootings or even the COVID-19 pandemic.



### Difference

Feeling different can lead to a lack of confidence in social interactions. This can be experienced by first-generation immigrants, members of the LGBTQ+ community, people of color, people with disabilities or anyone who may feel different.



### Modernity

Modern life has changed how we socialize, and human connection is part of who we are as humans. Social media can connect—but it can also make us feel more isolated.



### Aging

As we age, we are more likely to feel the impacts of some or all of the issues listed here. Increased disability, caregiving responsibilities or shrinking social circles can make it harder to connect with others.

## The Importance of Early Intervention

Developing an understanding of loneliness and its health implications can help us intervene early. This is important because the feelings of loneliness can lead to a loss of confidence and influence behavior. Loneliness can be described as a “downward spiral” in which negative thoughts cause withdrawal, which in turn causes increased levels of negative thoughts, loneliness and isolation.

<sup>1</sup> Project UnLonely: Healing Our Crisis of Disconnection, Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH, 2023



## Taking Action to Create Connection

Just as there isn't one way to feel connection, there isn't one way to feel a lack of connection. Understanding the precise ways someone feels lonely will help guide the possible interventions.

### Psychological Loneliness

Psychological loneliness is the subjective feeling about a lack of positive and supportive relationships. A person feeling psychological loneliness may be surrounded by people, but not feel loved or understood by any of them. Someone feeling psychological loneliness may say they don't have enough people in whom they could confide or who would support them no matter what.

#### *Ways to Help*

It is important to remember that the quality of relationships is more important than the quantity. Those feeling psychological loneliness may benefit from a one-on-one volunteer visiting program, a telephone reassurance program or a home care companion service. Or perhaps just a friend who checks in on them when they miss a pickleball session or a neighbor who stops to chat when walking their dog.

### Societal Loneliness

Societal loneliness stems from a lack of belonging. We all need places where we feel safe and accepted. People who do not feel accepted at work, school or in the community may self-isolate.

#### *Ways to Help*

It is important that we all have places where we feel valued for who we are as people. Look for support groups, community organizations, faith communities, clubs or neighborhoods that are inclusive or designed to support specific identities (ex: BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrant, caregiver, widow).

### Existential Loneliness

Having questions about purpose is common, but consistent feelings of a lack of worth or reason for existing can lead to loneliness and isolation. These questions can be especially potent as people age and transition out of roles where they may have found self-worth, such as a career, full-time parenting or as a partner or spouse.

#### *Ways to Help*

For every interest and ability there is a volunteer opportunity waiting to be filled. Helping someone identify ways they can put their interests and passions to work for the greater good may require assistance with online searches, paperwork or a bit of networking. Finding worth or purpose may take the form of reconnecting to a faith community, joining a writers group, advising neighbors on gardening or feeding a neighbor's cats while they travel.

# Research-Proven Effective Interventions for Loneliness

- ✓ Interventions that target specific risk factors: Examples include classes for fall prevention or diabetes management.
- ✓ Mindfulness: Developing a mindfulness practice can be done alone or in a group or class. It can be supported by free apps or videos or found within faith, artistic, nature or athletic activities.
- ✓ Social prescribing: Connecting people to activities, groups and support that improve health and well-being.
- ✓ Support groups.
- ✓ Technological interventions: Availability of technology devices from iPads to hearing aids, general training and assistance, virtual support groups.
- ✓ Positive psychology: A branch of psychology focused on the character strengths and behaviors that allow individuals to build a life of meaning and purpose. It is centered on connecting with others, developing gratitude and savoring pleasure.
- ✓ Cognitive behavioral therapy.
- ✓ Pharmaceutical interventions.

## Alzheimer's Association Minnesota North Dakota

The 24/7 Helpline serves people with memory loss, care partners, health care professionals, the general public, diverse populations and concerned friends and family. The Helpline offers referrals to local community programs and services, dementia-related education, crisis assistance and emotional support. Call 1-800-272-3900 or visit [alz.org/mnnd](http://alz.org/mnnd).

## Senior LinkAge Line

This resource provides information, assistance and connections to various services and resources in your community. Call 1-800-333-2433 or visit <https://mn.gov/adresources>.

## AARP Local Resources

Find events and volunteer opportunities in your community at <https://local.aarp.org/>.

## Take Action

[www.actonalz.org/engagement](http://www.actonalz.org/engagement)

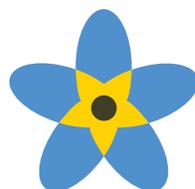
[www.dementiafriendsmn.org](http://www.dementiafriendsmn.org)

[www.rememberproject.org](http://www.rememberproject.org)

[www.engagingolderadults.org/hub](http://www.engagingolderadults.org/hub)



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