

A CAREGIVER'S GUIDE TO COMBATTING LONELINESS IN OLDER ADULTS



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INTRODUCTION

Did you know that loneliness is deadlier than smoking?

In fact, studies have shown that social isolation is as important a risk factor for early death as heart disease, obesity, and physical inactivity.

While many of us have experienced the negative feelings associated with loneliness at some point in our lifetimes, it can be easy to overlook loneliness' real dangers, perhaps because it does not pose an immediate or apparent threat to our physical well-being. However, for older adults and seniors for which loneliness may be chronic, the condition can damage almost every aspect of their lives: from their relationships, to their emotional and mental health, to their ability to function. In a time such as a global pandemic, where isolation may be required to preserve their health, the likelihood of feeling lonely only increases.

For as detrimental as loneliness can be, there are numerous ways to combat it and help older adults lead full and enjoyable lives. In this guide, we will take a closer look at the impact loneliness has on the senior population and discuss ways caregivers can help patients recover from and avoid this all-too-common state.

“Social isolation is as important a risk factor for early death as heart disease, obesity, and physical inactivity.”





UNDERSTANDING LONELINESS

Before diving into methods to overcome loneliness and prevent it from occurring, it's important to get a full picture of not only how common loneliness is, but also why it happens in the first place.

“Loneliness is prevalent in older adults because of a multitude of life changes that often occur with aging,” said Joyce Magbanua, MSN, RN, NE-BC, Director of Nursing at Open Systems Healthcare, an organization providing in-home personal care, skilled nursing, and behavioral services to adults and seniors in six states and the District of Columbia. “For many, life events such as children moving farther away, the onset of weakening chronic diagnoses contributing to a diminished sense of independence, or loved ones and friends dying; all such factors significantly contribute to loneliness in older adults.”

Certain health conditions older adults are more prone to may also contribute to feelings of isolation. For example, hearing loss can not only damage one's self-esteem and overall enjoyment of life but can also lead to feeling like an outsider, given that they may not be able to participate in social situations like they once could.

It is important to note that solitude is not the same as loneliness. One can be alone without feeling lonely, and one can feel lonely without being alone. Typically, when someone feels an overwhelming absence in their lives, or is not experiencing the same fulfilling level of social connection they once did, is when loneliness sets in.

Loneliness is subjective; it can only be truly identified by the person experiencing it



SOLITUDE

*I'm content when
I'm alone*



LONELINESS

*I don't like being
alone*

A GROWING PROBLEM WITH HEIGHTENED HEALTH RISKS

Loneliness has been a growing problem for decades, and it's only been made worse by COVID-19. According to Cigna's 2020 Loneliness Index, three in five adults (61%) report they are lonely, a seven percentage-point increase from 2018.

These rates are alarming, and the effects loneliness has on our health are an equal cause for concern.

"Studies have shown how mental and physical health are linked and therefore have a significant impact on overall well-being," said Magbanua. "Loneliness should be considered as a serious threat to a patient's quality of life."

"Individuals with less social connection have disrupted sleep patterns, altered immune systems, more inflammation, and higher levels of stress hormones," a 2016 article in the *New York Times* notes. "Loneliness can accelerate cognitive decline in older adults, and isolated individuals are twice as likely to die prematurely as those with more robust social interactions."

ACCORDING TO THE CDC, IN OLDER ADULTS AGED 50 AND OLDER:



Loneliness can put patients at increased risk for higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.



Poor social relationships (characterized by social isolation or loneliness) were associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.



Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and 57% increased risk of emergency department visits.

The consequences are clear: loneliness puts our health at risk. But what are we to do in a global pandemic, when isolation is required to preserve our physical well-being?





LIFE & LONELINESS DURING COVID-19

While the physical and neurological dangers posed by contracting COVID-19 are a particular threat to older adults, the isolation aspect of the pandemic has proven just as damaging.

“I personally have witnessed the effects of COVID-19 restrictions on the mental health of my elderly loved ones,” Magbanua said. “My parents looked forward to seeing their grandchildren throughout the week and indulge in hugs and kisses and all the warm interaction that happens between grandchildren and their grandparents. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, these interactions were reduced to exuberant waves of hello and flying kisses from behind a screen door.”

Magbanua continued, “In a conversation with my parents, they told me frankly, ‘We’re lucky we have each other, but I don’t know if we could handle this if we lived alone.’”

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the unparalleled “social distancing” plans that are vital to preventing the spread of the virus but have increased feelings of loneliness in older adults.

According to a 2020 Cambridge University study, “Older adults are (also) more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness as they are functionally very dependent on family members or supports by community services. While robust social restrictions are necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it is of critical importance to bear in mind that social distancing should not equate to social disconnection.”

“While it requires some creativity, there are ways to lessen the feelings of disconnection many older adults are currently facing and help them find a renewed sense of purpose.”



MAKING HEALING HAPPEN

As a homecare provider, you and your caregivers are in the fortunate position to positively impact your patients' lives.

“Not only are caregivers and nurses the eyes and ears of the physician in the home, but they are also the advocates, the counselors, and the ‘family’ who comes and visits to offer meaningful support, Magbanua said.”

She added, “Homecare agencies not only help patients reach their functional goals and promote optimal levels of well-being, but they also serve as the community and social interaction that patients need to combat loneliness and social isolation.”

A caregiver may be the only person a patient sees all week. While this social interaction may be of the utmost importance to them, it's critical for patients to experience other forms of connection as well.



WAYS TO COMBAT LONELINESS, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

While the despair of others may feel like a heavy burden to carry in the midst of a pandemic, it is empowering for caregivers to realize that they have the opportunity to help their patients overcome loneliness. There are several things they can do to help older adults feel purposeful, included, and connected — now and in the post-COVID world.

“In times of quarantine or required isolation, aides can help their patients by remembering this key principle: Physical isolation does not mean that patients must lose their connection to their community,” Magbanua said.

“We can all fight against loneliness by engaging
in random acts of kindness.”
-Gail Honeyman

CONNECT VIRTUALLY

A number of studies indicate that maintaining strong social connections and keeping mentally active as we age may lower the risk of cognitive decline and dementia. While experts are not certain about the reason for this association, it may be due to a strengthening of connections between nerve cells in the brain, the Alzheimer’s Association reports.

Caregivers can help patients connect with their friends and family members by showing them how to navigate simple apps, tablets, and smartphones for video chatting and other forms of communication. Scheduling regular Facetime calls with their loved ones will give them something to look forward to and can add structure to their days.



CHECK IN ON THEIR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Just as you would care for a patient showing signs of a cold or ear infection, be sure you're checking in on their emotional health as well. Do they seem agitated or nervous? Are they not sleeping well? Eating more or less than usual?

Social determinants of health, or the societal conditions that affect a person's health, functioning, and quality of life, are key factors to consider throughout the overall care process. Technology can assist caregivers in making these types of observations regularly and reporting on them in a structured and efficient way.

For example, HHAeXchange offers a caregiver mobile app that automatically prompts aides at the time of clock-out with pre-defined questions regarding the patient's condition. Caregivers can also add non-diagnosis-related observations to track changes such as a patient running low on medication or a malfunctioning medical device. If there are any negative changes in a patient's health based on an aide's response or observation, the app will notify your agency immediately.

In addition to making simple observations on their emotional well-being, taking part in standard best practices such as regular health checkups, clear and frequent communication, and ensuring all prescriptions are filled and equipment is properly maintained will give your patients a much-needed sense of calm and normalcy.

PLAY THEIR FAVORITE MUSIC

Comfort can be found in the simplest of pleasures. For patients of all ages, listening to their favorite melodies can get their minds off their troubles and transport them to happier times.

"Listening to music the patients enjoy is linked to benefits of improving mood and reducing anxiety and stress," Magbanua says. "Music also assists in better immune function and improved sleep."





GET MOVING, BUT TAKE IT SLOW

It's no secret that physical exercise brings a host of mental health benefits. The key here, especially with patients who have been sedentary for a period of time, is to start small. Even 5-10 minutes of light exercise a day can improve mood, help with sleep, and promote healthier habits overall.

Consider incorporating a few gentle stretches into their days, practicing basic chair exercises, or using household items for light weightlifting. You can also utilize technology to stream low-impact fitness exercises designed for seniors. If conditions allow, encourage a walk down the street or around the block together. Just the act of getting outside and connecting with nature may be enough to lift patients' spirits and help them feel less alone.

GIVE THE FACTS AND REMEMBER TO BREATHE

Too much of anything is never a good thing, and consumption of COVID-19 news is no exception. Caregivers can offer patients reliable data regarding the pandemic which may alleviate anxiety and unfounded fears. If appropriate, try to limit your patients' intake of negative news briefs and sensationalized tabloids where possible. You can also suggest healthier entertainment alternatives such as a fiction novel to help their mind escape or a new TV show to watch together.

Caregivers can also help patients by teaching them simple breathing exercises and offering meditation videos and other relaxation techniques proven to lower anxiety and depression.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST, CARE FOR YOUR CAREGIVERS.

The day you signed on to work in homecare, you made a commitment to protect the health of others – and that includes your caregivers.

To prevent caregiver burnout, ensure your caregivers are equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to properly care for patients. Set practical work schedules and do your best to appropriately match caregivers to clients. Additionally, maintaining COVID-19 safety measures can help them feel more secure and in control in a time when much is still uncertain.

Train them to care for themselves as they will care for others. When constructing a training plan, be sure to incorporate tips for self-care as well. Afterall, if your aides are going to be successful on the job, they must also take the steps to keep themselves mentally, physically, and emotionally healthy.

Caregiving can be isolating work, and some aides may be hesitant to open up about any challenges they're facing on the job. Do your best to create an environment where caregivers feel comfortable approaching you or another appropriate member of your staff if they have a problem. Just knowing that they are not alone in their struggle, and that someone understands where they're coming from and may even have been in their situation before, can be tremendously helpful.

TIPS FOR PREVENTING CAREGIVER BURNOUT:

1



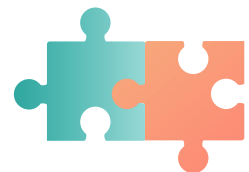
Equip them with the right tools

2



Set practical work schedules

3



Appropriately match caregivers to clients

4



Train them to care for themselves as they will care for others

5



Lend an ear to their problems

An illustration on the left side of the page depicts a caregiver, a woman with long dark hair wearing an orange shirt and grey pants, pushing a wheelchair. Seated in the wheelchair is an elderly person with grey hair wearing a blue sweater and black pants. Both individuals are wearing white face masks. They are walking on a light blue path. In the background, there is a stylized grey city skyline with a prominent spire, a large teal tree, and a bright orange and yellow sun or sky in the upper left corner.

ADJUSTING TO THE NEW NORMAL

With vaccinations rolling out and brighter days on the horizon, many of us have grown excited about the possibility of returning to normal. But indeed, things might never be just as they were, and for some patients, life post-COVID may not look too different from their days during the pandemic. This is why it is critical to start practicing healthy habits now to ward off feelings of loneliness in the future.

As COVID-19 cases drop and patients and their caregivers become fully vaccinated, they can consider cultivating new interests, in addition to picking up hobbies they may have enjoyed previously.

Given that the risk of contracting COVID-19 outdoors remains low, socially distanced, outside activities are most encouraged. Even if it means only sitting on the porch, or observing the neighborhood and scenery, just getting some sun and fresh air can work wonders. If possible, consider involving the patient in community gardening, or inspire them to start their own gardening project. This, as well as outdoor aerobics or art classes, can help restore their sense of purpose and make them feel productive and accomplished – all of which reduce feelings of loneliness.

As caregivers, it is good practice to regularly observe patients' mental and emotional states, just as you'd care for their physical health. It's important to remember that no patient is immune to loneliness, even those that appear to have a solid support network.

By reminding patients that we all experience feelings of loneliness from time to time, they may find comfort in the fact that they are never truly alone ■

ABOUT HHAEXCHANGE

Founded in 2008, HHAeXchange is the leading technology platform for homecare and self-direction program management. Developed specifically for the Medicaid patient population, the HHAeXchange platform connects state agencies, managed care payers, providers, and caregivers through its intuitive web-based platform, enabling unparalleled communication, transparency, efficiency, and compliance. For more information, visit hhaexchange.com.





Better Homecare, Better Health