



FACTSHEET: SOCIAL ISOLATION & LONELINESS IN OLDER PEOPLE

Relationship and connection are an essential ingredient for good physical and mental health for all people including the elderly.

Whilst some people are content with their own company at least 50% of older people will experience severe loneliness at some time in their old age. Social Isolation has become a common problem for the elderly due to reduced income, mobility, health, loss of loved ones and distance from family. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced people into social isolation and many older people are feeling scared, isolated, and hopeless.



Defining Social Isolation & Loneliness

Loneliness and social isolation are common experiences for older people but mean different things. **Loneliness** refers to the personal feelings of distress and discomfort that come with being alone. **Social isolation** refers to the state of lacking social connection to family, friends, and the wider community. It is important to remember though that not all socially isolated folk feel lonely and not all lonely folk are socially isolated.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Regular and quality interactions with loved ones and friends is an essential protective factor for the health of older people. One of the consequences of COVID-19 has been the severe reduction in visits from and to family and friends due to lockdown requirements increasing their social isolation. Older people do not necessarily have the know-how or access to technology that can help maintain connections.

Restrictions on group activities and access to outdoors also add to older people's sense of disconnection from the world.

Older people feel greatly their loss of independence and capacity, many end up feeling helpless and others feeling angry with what they see as confinement. Finally, older people get bored like anyone else and boredom leads to frustration and misery.



What can you do to help?

There are several ways aged care workers can assist residents feel less socially isolated and lonely. Here are some ideas.

- When talking with residents be fully present when listening
- Introduce residents with similar interests to each other and encourage them to get together
- Establish activity areas where residents can engage in a shared activity (e.g., jigsaws, cards, or board games, knitting circles)
- Group activities that involve discussion rather than competition assist residents in getting to know each other better (think reminiscence or 'getting to know you' games rather than trivia or bingo)
- Facilitate skype or zoom sessions with family
- Set up tea breaks on verandas or in sunny areas so that residents can get some fresh air
- Set up a buddy system between residents who are particularly poorly and those who are more active
- Visits from animal companions can help a great deal
- Book Club – there are multiple ways of doing this either everyone reads or listens to a book and discusses it or perhaps there are small groups where care staff or residents themselves take turns reading to others.
- Taking up a community project – e.g., knitting blankets for homeless, sharing photos and memories for local historical societies, recording stories of their history to be shared with school children
- Show and tell sessions where residents can take turns sharing pictures, objects, or stories from their life with other residents.

Carers will find that any efforts to support social connection will boost morale, increase self-care and co-operation, and reduce problematic behaviours.



The key to supporting older people during social isolation is ***engagement not entertainment.***



People who feel a sense of social connectedness have increased energy and motivation.