

Loneliness & Seniors: A Link to Dementia

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When we think of loneliness, the image of a senior pops into our minds. As we grow older, loneliness becomes a large part of our lives because children grow up and move away, there is a break in the relationship between a parent or child or other health issues (e.g. depression). We all know that feeling "lonely" can lead to other unhealthy behaviors, such as overeating and heavy drinking. However, a recent study by Florida State University (FSU) has determined that loneliness has a connection to an increased risk of dementia in older adults over the age of 50. Also, the study revealed that all walks of life were affected by loneliness, and the amount of social activity had no bearing on it. Other risk factors had no effect on the amount of loneliness as well, including gender, race, and education.

According to medicalnewstoday.com, the study was based on a Health and Retirement survey (a United States government-sponsored survey). This was a remarkable study because it had the largest sample ever (over 12,000 seniors) and follow-up span (10 years). The researchers studied the amount of loneliness and social isolation the seniors had as well as other factors (i.e. genetics). The result was a greater risk of dementia by a surprising 40%, with feelings of loneliness as the major risk factor. Those who experienced loneliness were more likely to have chronic health issues which can lead to dementia, such as high blood pressure and diabetes. There are physical and behavioral changes that are associated with being lonely, such as drinking and inflammation per Dr. Angelina Sutin, an author of the study and an associate professor in FSU's College of Medicine.

Loneliness can develop due to being in a place, such as a nursing home. A senior can experience social isolation due to a physical limitation and can also be lonely due to not wanting to be part of his or her community. And loneliness increases when a person doesn't get much contact from family or friends.

It's important to note that loneliness is not the same as social isolation. A person can be socially isolated because of where they chose to live or the position the person has (or had). Thus, social isolation is an act. Loneliness is a feeling. A person feels lonely because he or she feels different, which causes him or her to not fit in with those around them. For example, a mother can feel lonely in a group of women who do not have children.

Loneliness can also occur when we don't speak to another person directly (in person). Social media does not help us to have meaningful relationships. We can connect with people through Twitter or Facebook, but it is not a genuine connection because the recipients cannot see our facial expressions. And the fact that it's much easier to just text someone can also make us feel lonely.

So, how can we combat loneliness? Here are some ways.

Get a pet. Studies have shown that having a pet (or being around one) reduces stress and high blood pressure. (Remember, high blood pressure puts you at a higher risk for dementia.) Petting an animal lowers a person's blood pressure as well as heart rate. Even watching fish has shown to have a calming effect. Pets owners get more exercise. Taking a dog for a walk offers a dual benefit because you get exercise and a walk allows you to clear your head. Playing with a cat also provides a form of exercise.

Talk to a friend. This means speaking face to face. Setting up a regular time to meet for coffee is a great way to catch up with a friend. It's also an opportunity to tell the other person that you are feeling lonely. A friend can offer some solutions to help you feel better.

Loneliness can have so many negative impacts on a seniors overall health. It's something that can be avoided with the help of in home care!"

— Michele Berman, Owner

Get creative. A project will take the focus off your loneliness. The enjoyment you get from the project supersedes the feeling of loneliness. Joining a group that enjoys the same project (e.g. painting or scrapbooking) will help you get rid of the feeling that doesn't fit in with anyone. Plus, a group provides social contact for older people.

Help others in need. When you help another person, you will be less self-focused. Nothing puts a smile on a person's face that seeing the good that results from helping others. Joining a charity will put you in contact with others who feel as strongly as you do about the cause and you can put your creativity to work by organizing bake sales, volunteering at an event, creating flyers etc.

Connect with others who feel lonely. This plays into others who feel different. Sending a card or an email will brighten someone's day and lets them know that they aren't alone. You'll realize that a lot of people also feel lonely, and it is nothing to be ashamed of.

Believe it or not, singing is a great way to lower stress and connect with others. According to Psychology Today, singing in a community group or choir can improve your mental health and provide a needed disconnect from our devices. Now only will you feel good, but those in the audience will feel good too. And you will look forward to being part of the group. Singing is also been proven to help with memory loss.

Talk to strangers. This may go against what you were taught as a kid but talking to strangers can help you reduce your feeling of loneliness. You can introduce yourself to your neighbors or talk to someone while in the lobby of your doctor's office. When you do this, you may find out the person you are talking to is lonely as well. On the flip side, it's a great way to tackle shyness.

Since loneliness can be reduced, it's called a modifiable risk factor. It should be considered a serious mental health issue because it is a dementia risk, like Alzheimer's (see Alzheimer's Society of America), since 42 million Americans report being lonely per the American Psychological Association. It's vital that you acknowledge when you feel lonely and to do something about it to boost your brain health. We all have an internal need for social interaction. Some believe loneliness can be a subjective feeling as well as have a subjective experience of social isolation. However, your own situation with loneliness is unique and you should not compare your loneliness to another person's. To learn more about the social needs of seniors, you can check out the Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences. They were the first journals to publish articles on aging. Series B are articles on the psychological issues associated with adulthood and old age.

If you are aren't sure what actual social isolation is or have more questions about loneliness, you can check with your healthcare provider.

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About Comfort Keepers Philadelphia:

Owners Michele Berman and her brother, Marc Reisman, took over Huntington Valley Comfort Keepers in 2000, when their father, Richard Reisman, was diagnosed with lung cancer and became increasingly ill. They experienced firsthand the care and comfort provided by Comfort Keepers. In fact, Richard Reisman originally started the business when his mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. At that time, there weren't many options for those in need of additional support and quality care. Today, the owners are proud to carry on the legacy of their father, but they are even more proud of the difference Comfort Keepers is making to those who need their help the most.

To find out more about Comfort Keepers' commitment to excellence, please call 215.885.9140.

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