

## Tackling Holiday Blues

Casey Ek Nov 23, 2018 Updated Nov 23, 2018 0



Thanksgiving, an occasion that for many signals the start of the holiday season, marks a time in which family and friends gather to celebrate the eclipsing year. For many, the season is jovial as old and new faces assemble under common roofs. But for those without the fortune of having or at least feeling like they have those with whom they can share the holidays, the time can be the loneliest of

the year. And according to Amy Burt, associate medical director at UCare, the feeling of loneliness has specific implications for aging and elderly adults, as she penned in her 2018 article *Loneliness 101: Understanding the Impact on Your Physical and Mental Health*.

A survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, a non-profit healthcare research organization, found that one in five Americans are always or often lonely, Burt noted in her 2018 article. Burt also cited a separate study from American Association of Retired Persons that stated one in three Americans over the age of 45 reported being lonely.

For Angelina Sutin, an associate professor at Florida State University's College of Medicine whose team in October published a paper in the *Journals of Gerontology* on the effects of loneliness as it pertains to health risks, this may be a troubling statistic.

Sutin's findings suggest that loneliness apart from posing an acute emotional tax also increases the risk of dementia by 40 percent.

"We are not the first people to show that loneliness is associated with increase risk of dementia, Sutin stated to FSU's official news site, "But this is by far the largest sample yet, with a long follow-up. And the population was more diverse."

Her team's findings from data collected from 12,000 participants collected over 10 years showed that loneliness has the same effects across gender, race and ethnic and educational lines.

Sutin noted that "loneliness" does not necessarily mean being in physical social isolation as it pertained to her findings.

"It's a feeling that you do not fit in or do not belong with the people around you," Sutin said. "You can have somebody who lives alone, who doesn't have very much contact with people, but has enough—and that fills their internal need for socializing. So even though objectively you might think that person is socially isolated, they don't feel lonely. The flip side is that you can be around a lot of people and be socially engaged and interactive and still feel like you don't belong. From the outside it looks like you have great social engagement, but the subjective feeling is that you're not part of the group."

A separate AARP survey from 2017 found that 31 percent of adults over the age of 18 report being lonely specifically during the holidays within the last five years of the survey.

Burt noted that seniors in particular have to grapple with the challenges of overcoming loneliness, and

that those challenges come by way of life changes such as relocating to senior living or care facilities or losing a spouse. Burt also noted that hearing and vision as well as other communicative barriers can lend to feelings of loneliness.

But for both Burt and Sutin, loneliness does not have to be a permanent condition. Burt noted that while reaching out to senior family members and ensuring they have paid therapists can be helpful, there is no replacement for friendships with peers.

“Loneliness is curable and can get better with the effort to build connections,” Burt wrote.

Burt added that tackling holiday loneliness requires a plan, which might include setting aside time for specific activities you or loved ones might enjoy. When addressing the loneliness of loved ones, she noted, in addition to fostering common interests it is important to ask open-ended over statements like “You’re lonely and I am here to help you.” Burt instead suggest saying “Teach me how to...” or “ Tell me about...”

“It’s important to remember that loneliness is a curable condition, not a disease,” Burt wrote. “With some individual planning and support from friends and loved ones, we can move toward everyone sitting together around the campfire.”