



# Social Isolation

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## Health Risks of Loneliness

Increasingly, experts warn that loneliness has reached epidemic proportions in the developed world and that the effects of social isolation may be as serious to our health as obesity and smoking.

In studies presented at the 2017 American Psychological Association annual conference, researchers reported that people with greater social connections reduced their risk of dying prematurely by 50 percent and that social isolation, loneliness or living alone played a significant role in premature death. These findings build on previous studies showing that loneliness had the same negative impact on health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and exceeded the impacts of many other well-know risk factors, including obesity and physical inactivity.

### Physical and Mental Health Effects of Loneliness

According to recent studies, loneliness has been associated with higher risks of:

#### Physical health

- Overall mortality
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Elevated blood pressure
- Physical disability in general

#### Mental health

- Cognitive decline
- Dementia
- Depression and anxiety
- Suicide

Many of these factors carry over into the workplace, as well. Writing in the Harvard Business Review, the former surgeon general Dr. Vivek H. Murthy warned that, "Loneliness is also associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression and anxiety. At work, loneliness reduces task performance, limits creativity and impairs other aspects of executive function such as reasoning and decision making. For our health and our work, it is imperative that we address the loneliness epidemic quickly."

The data on loneliness is especially concerning when you consider that 35 percent, or more than one-third, of Americans 45 and older reported being lonely, according to an AARP survey. That means roughly 43 million older adults in the U.S. suffer from chronic loneliness.

The causes of this epidemic are widely debated, although many experts point to the new prominence of technology in our lives, a breakdown in family ties and fewer community-based support networks. They have isolated several risk factors for loneliness.

General risk factors:

- Lack of public transportation
- Isolated housing location
- Fear of crime
- Few or no family connections
- High population turnover
- Demographic changes
- Technological changes

Elderly risk factors:

- Poor health
- Sensory loss
- Loss of mobility
- Lower income
- Bereavement
- Retirement
- Mental health issues

The AARP survey found that lack of social support and involvement in social events was directly associated with loneliness. According to the study, those identified as suffering from chronic loneliness were less likely to be involved in activities that could help them build a social network, such as:

- Attending religious services
- Engaging in hobbies
- Volunteering
- Belonging to a local community organization, club or group

## What You Can Do

If you are feeling lonely, there are some simple steps you can take to improve your mood and end your isolation:

**Reach out to friends and family.** Sometimes even a short phone call can make you feel better.

**Improve your well-being.** Make sure you have a healthy diet, exercise regularly and schedule a yearly checkup with your doctor.

**Share your skills with others.** Offer to volunteer at a local church, school or community organization to help others.

**Get out and do something.** Check with your local park district, social club, continuing education program or similar organization and get involved. You will learn new things while making new social connections.

**Get a mental health checkup.** Loneliness is often associated with mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. You can also contact your Employee Assistance Program to get help.

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Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

## Meeting New People

Whether you have moved to a new town, are looking for a relationship or simply want to widen your circle of friends, it can be difficult to meet new people. Opportunities to meet new people are plentiful if you step out of your everyday routine. Opening yourself up to new experiences can help you extend a circle of friends.

Although the prospect of meeting new people can be intimidating, you should strive to be yourself. If you are shy and feel uneasy approaching strangers, you may feel more comfortable in settings designed for people to interact, such as participating in volunteer groups, clubs or continuing education courses. Good communication skills are also important. Eye contact, a smile or a simple hello can help you start a conversation with someone you would like to meet.

### Around Town

Your daily routine offers many chances to strike up conversations with people. Your best options will be places where people have extra time and are open to conversation. The local laundromat can be a good place to meet people while waiting in line for the dryer or folding clothes. Bookstores and coffee shops also are good places to meet others.

### Volunteer Groups

Volunteer organizations can be great places to meet people while helping out your community. Opportunities to volunteer are everywhere: environmental groups, food pantries, literacy programs, hospitals, etc. Investigate programs in your community, and seek out those that appeal to your personal interests. Community events such as parades, festivals and fun runs also are good places to connect with people working on the event.

### Hobbies

Your hobbies can lead you to meet people with similar interests. Do you enjoy reading mysteries? Check out the book clubs at your favorite bookstore, or consider starting your own. Do you like to garden? Look into whether your community has a garden association or volunteer gardening group.

Whatever hobbies you enjoy, many communities have associations or clubs for people who enjoy the same activities. To locate groups in your area, try checking the internet for meeting times and places. Community newspapers, libraries and local grocery stores also post calendars of events.

### Sports

Whether at the gym or in a social league, you can use your love of sports to create a new social circle. If you enjoy team sports, consider joining a weekend football, softball or volleyball league. Runners can look into local running clubs or groups training together for an upcoming marathon. Gyms also can be good places to meet people, especially right before and after group classes.

### Civic and Professional Organizations

Most professional organizations have networking or social events where you can meet people working in your field. If you prefer to diversify your social contacts, check out a new group, and make contacts outside of your profession. Many civic groups, such as museums, symphonies, opera companies and ballet troupes, also have member organizations that offer social events and networking and volunteer opportunities.

### Religious Groups

If religion is important to you, your church, temple or your house of worship is a place to meet people who share similar beliefs. Inquire about opportunities to volunteer or participate in sponsored activities. They all have social programs to welcome new members.

## Adult Education Courses

Many universities, trade schools and high schools offer continuing education courses on a variety of topics. Look for classes that meet more than once and require class participation so you can get to know your fellow classmates.

## Friends and Family

People you already know could be your best resource for expanding your social circle. Let your family and friends know specifically what type of people you want to meet, and ask for introductions. Let them know you want to be invited to parties and other gatherings with people outside your regular group of friends. Be open about trying new activities, and make time to join in activities when invited.

## Meeting People Online

With online dating services and chat rooms or apps, the Internet can be a very effective way to meet new people. Meeting someone online by participating in online chats, exchanging email or messages can be less intimidating than meeting someone for the first time face-to-face.

Also, online, you literally can meet people any time and any place, which can be a bonus for busy professionals. However, the Internet does have some disadvantages. It is easy for someone to conceal his or her real identity online.

Be careful when meeting people online, and take time to really get to know them by asking questions through email, chat and phone conversations before you make plans to meet in person.

## Safe Introductions

When you are getting together with someone for the first time, especially if you met online, consider the following tips to help ensure a safe and comfortable meeting:

- Do not reveal personal information such as your last name, phone number or address until you feel comfortable.
- Make plans to meet in a public place where there are other people, such as a restaurant or coffee shop, the first time you get together.
- Before you go, be sure to let a family member or friend know the name of the person you are meeting, as well as when and where you are meeting.
- Use common sense, and follow your instincts. If you feel like someone is concealing information or acting strangely, do not continue the relationship. It is easier to end things early than to try to extricate yourself from a difficult problem or situation.

A new friend or romantic partner offers the opportunity to enrich your life in a variety of ways. By keeping an open mind and trying new experiences safely, you can widen your social circle and find new friends to enjoy your time with.

## Resources

- ConnectSafely: [www.connectsafely.org](http://www.connectsafely.org)
- National Institute of Mental Health: [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- VolunteerMatch: [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)
- United We Serve: [www.serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov)

## Fostering Friendships

People seem to have a natural need for friends, and with good reason. Friends increase your enjoyment of life, relieve feelings of loneliness and help reduce stress and improve your overall physical and mental health. Strong friendships, based on trust and respect, will survive the test of time. But sometimes relationships can be taken for granted. Life is busy, and it is easy to forget to show our appreciation for our friendships.

### Strengthen the Friendship

All it takes is a little effort and creativity to keep relationships alive and fun. Use these ideas to keep your friendships strong:

- Update your phone contacts every six months; it gives you a chance to catch up with old friends.
- Send a nice card for no reason other than to let a friend know that you are thinking of him or her.
- Purchase items you know a friend would enjoy, and save them for holiday gift-giving.
- Think of a fun event or trip you and a friend experienced together, and call him or her and reminisce.
- Arrange visits with a friend and reunions with groups of friends.
- Set up an email list, or use a social networking site to message each other, post photos, and share announcements and memories.

### Workplace Friendships

You spend a lot of time with people at work. Try these ideas to indicate how much your relationships with your co-workers mean to you:

- Make their favorite foods as a surprise.
- Buy some low-cost, fun toys for co-workers to keep on their desks.
- If you see a television show or read an article that would interest a co-worker, share the link, or bring in the article.
- If someone helped you out, let his or her supervisor know with a quick thank you email.

### The Bottom Line

It takes time and effort to build and maintain a healthy friendship with mutual affection, trust and respect. Yet, nothing can add more to your life than having the care, love and support of a truly great friend.

### Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health: [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- WomensHealth.gov: [www.womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)
- HelpGuide.org: [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org)

## Loneliness and the Elderly

With the average life expectancy increasing, more people are living well past the traditional “retirement age.” Millions of seniors live alone because of divorce, the passing of their spouse or their children moving away.

One of the main problems facing these seniors is loneliness, but by using positive thinking and trying new things, many elderly people live happy, long and productive lives, even though they live by themselves. This HelpSheet<sup>SM</sup> looks at potential causes of loneliness in the elderly and offers ideas for how seniors can avoid lonesome feelings.

### Reasons the Elderly May Become Lonely

There are numerous reasons an elderly person might feel lonely. Reasons include:

- Their children move away.
- They retire from their jobs and do not engage in social activities.
- They are divorced or widowed. Their friends, relatives, spouses or significant others pass away.

All of these reasons are instances of change. Many people react by isolating themselves even further from human contact when the change involves the loss or disconnection from friends and relatives. Other seniors think they can avoid the pain of losing friends to death or distance by not making any new friends. Still more seniors feel they have outlived their usefulness and do not want to “burden” others with their presence.

### Ways to Combat Loneliness

If aging people are able to adapt to the changes in their lives, their Golden Years can be very productive in terms of activity and interpersonal relationships. With some positive thought and a little imagination, seniors and elderly people can incorporate new activities and technologies into their lives, with the end result being a happier, healthier and more social elderly population.

Here are some ideas elderly people can use to help avoid loneliness:

- **Leave the house.** A good first step is to try to spend time outdoors every day (weather permitting). Activities can include sitting on the front porch reading a book, working in a garden or walking around the block. Enter any restaurant or diner in the morning, and you will undoubtedly see seniors, many of whom come every day for coffee, breakfast and companionship. All of these activities can provide opportunities to socialize with other people.
- **Think positively and smile.** Having a friendly and approachable demeanor invites and encourages people to converse.
- **Write letters, and learn to use email and the Internet.** While these activities should not be used as replacements for actual human interaction, they are useful ways to keep in contact with friends and family who are far away. Keep a list of the steps required to send email by the computer in case you have trouble with technology.
- **Call people on the phone.** Many seniors sit around waiting for their phone to ring, so why not pick up the phone and call a friend or relative yourself? Phones, like email, are invaluable tools for keeping in touch with friends and family who live far away or across town.
- **Get a part-time job.** Many older adults who have retired find themselves taking a part-time job. A job can provide extra income and opportunities to meet and socialize with new people.
- **Make plans to celebrate holidays and birthdays.** Holidays and other special events are times when many seniors feel alone. Get out and celebrate.
- **Be active in a church or religious group.** Many churches, temples and synagogues hold activities and functions especially for their senior members.
- **Volunteer.** Many older people have skills and abilities they can share or teach to others. Charities, shelters, schools and hospitals provide seniors with numerous opportunities to volunteer.

- **Be active in local community groups.** Many cities and municipalities offer programs especially for senior citizens. With activities ranging from playing card games like bridge and pinochle to taking short trips, community groups are a popular way for older adults to meet and share experiences.
- **Take up a hobby.** Knitting, photography, quilt-making, camping, collecting and numerous other hobbies can be done alone, but like most things in life, they are more fun when other people are involved.
- **Become an active member of your lodge, club or other social organization.** Older adults often have more free time to devote to organizations they have belonged to for years. Seniors can consider running for a leadership position in their club or lodge, or they can simply play a more active role by participating in and helping plan new activities.
- **Consider moving to a senior living facility.** While some older people covet their independence, many seniors who live alone (especially those who live in rural areas) eventually opt to move to a senior living facility. There, elderly people can maintain their own personal space while also benefiting from living in close proximity to numerous other people in their same age group. And staff members will be close by to aid and assist in the event of a problem or emergency.

One thing the elderly should avoid doing is replacing all human interaction with a pet or television show. While pets are good companions for many seniors, they should not serve as substitutes for socializing with people. And everyone has their favorite television shows, but seniors who watch television all day long risk becoming withdrawn or isolated from society.

### Resources

- National Institute on Aging: [www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)
- Geriatric Mental Health Foundation: [www.gmhfonline.org](http://www.gmhfonline.org)

## Helping a Child Who Feels Left Out

Research confirms that many young children understand the concept of loneliness and report feeling lonely. Children of all ages who feel lonely can feel excluded, sad, bored, or even sick. They often have trouble making friends. These children need the support of caring adults in their lives so they can develop the social skills and confidence to overcome loneliness.

### Difficulties Lonely Children Face

Many children who describe themselves as lonely may be experiencing any of the following:

- Low self-esteem
- Self-consciousness
- Awkwardness with others
- Harsh self-criticism

All of these issues make children less likely to join in activities and form friendships, isolating them further and making it all the more difficult for them to improve their self-esteem. It can become a self-defeating cycle.

When lonely children do make friends, they can be more vulnerable to negative peer pressure to use drugs, alcohol or tobacco, hoping to please their new acquaintances so they will keep on being friends.

### Teenage Years

A lonely teen is at greater risk for making unhealthy choices about alcohol or seeking comfort in “togetherness” drugs like ecstasy.

Adolescence, especially, can be a roller-coaster ride. So many aspects of a teen’s life are changing, including his or her body, his or her relationships with friends and family, academic challenges, and plans for his or her future. This could test anyone’s confidence and self-esteem.

Here are some tips for helping a lonely teen:

- **Listen.** Be there to listen to your child with acceptance and compassion. Too often, children learn from peers and adults to ignore or discount their own feelings. They may think there is nothing you, as their parent, can do to help them, but your attention and encouragement can make a real difference.
- **Suggest new activities.** You can help your child meet new friends and build confidence in his or her abilities by encouraging him or her to try new activities, such as volunteering in the community, joining a hobby club, participating in a musical group, acting in a play or joining a sports team. Find activities that bring out the best in the child, and introduces him or her to new people. Let the child choose an enjoyable activity, and encourage him or her to balance between activities and new or challenging pursuits.
- **Help practice social skills.** Children may feel unsure about the “right way” to act to fit in. A parent or other trusted adult may be one of the few people who can have an open discussion with him or her about this, and your advice about social conduct and healthy relationships may provide the encouragement and preparation that is needed. Let a child observe your relationships, especially those that are longstanding. Talk about your friendships openly – the good times and the not-so-good times, the ups and the downs. A child should learn how putting effort into relationships is what contributes to their value and longevity. It is also helpful to practice refusal skills and provide insight on how to say no to alcohol, tobacco and drugs. This will allow the child to be more confident in the face of negative peer pressure.
- **Seek help for persistent problems.** If your child always seems sad, withdrawn, anxious or self-critical, he or she may be struggling with depression or anxiety. Talk about feelings, and keep communicating. Note the behaviors or other symptoms that worry you, how long they have been going on, how often they occur, and how severe they seem to be.

### Resources

- Administration for Children & Families: [www.acf.hhs.gov](http://www.acf.hhs.gov)
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

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- If someone helped you out, let his or her supervisor know with a quick email.

It takes time and effort to build and maintain healthy friendships. But it's worth it: Nothing adds more to your life than having the love and support of a truly great friend.

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# Health Risks of Loneliness

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## What You Can Do

If you are feeling lonely, there are some simple steps you can take to improve your mood and end your isolation:

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**Improve your well-being.** Make sure you are eating right, exercising regularly and scheduling a yearly checkup with your doctor.

**Share your skills with others.** Offer to volunteer at a local church, school or community organization to help yourself as you help others.

**Get out and do something.** Check with your local park district, social club, continuing education program or similar organization and get involved. You will learn new things while making new social connections.

**Get a mental health checkup.** Loneliness is often associated with mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. If you have not been feeling yourself lately, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. You can also contact your Employee Assistance Program to get help.

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