

Addressing Loneliness and Isolation Among Older Adults

For Aging & Behavioral Health Professionals

From the Oregon Health Authority's Behavioral Health Initiative for Older Adults and People with Physical Disabilities

What are social isolation and loneliness? How do they impact older adults and people with physical disabilities?



Loneliness and social isolation are similar, though **distinct** behavioral health issues. **Loneliness** is the feeling of being alone or separated. **Social isolation** involves a lack of social contacts and people to interact with regularly. People can live alone and not feel lonely or socially isolated, and they can feel lonely while being with other people.

Loneliness and isolation have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began. About 24% of community-dwelling Americans 65+ are considered socially isolated, while 43% of adults 60+ report feeling lonely (NASEM, 2020). Social isolation has a price: it is associated with roughly \$6.7 billion in excess annual health care costs for Medicare beneficiaries and contributes to poor health outcomes, including a 50% increased risk of early mortality (Commonwealth Fund, 2021).



What can aging and behavioral health professionals do?

In 2020, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering & Medicine (NASEM)ⁱ reported on the health care system's role in mitigating social isolation and loneliness. There are **five goals** to enhance the health care sector's role (including aging and behavioral health professionals) in addressing the impacts of social isolation and loneliness in older adults.

Below the goals are listed in two categories: utilization and promotion of **community-based networks** and **evidence-based and -informed practices**.

Utilize and promote community-based networks

Goal #1: *Strengthen ties between the health care system and community-based networks and resources that address social isolation and loneliness in older adults. Information about national/community-based resources are listed here.*

Relevant community-based networks that address loneliness and isolation are listed to the right.

AARP: Provides helpful information to older adults to improve quality of life and provides access to community connection tools. aarp.org

Area Agencies on Aging (AAA): Provides information and assistance with programs including nutrition, meal programs (i.e., counseling and home-delivered or group meals), caregiver support, and more. usaging.org

Eldercare Locator: Provides a free service from ACL that helps find local resources (e.g., financial support, caregiving services, volunteer opportunities, transportation) for older adults. eldercare.acl.gov

National Council on Aging (NCOA): Works with nonprofit organizations, governments, and businesses to provide community programs, and services. Programming aims to address increasing social connectedness, healthy aging, etc. ncoa.org

National Institute on Aging (NIA): Provides materials on social isolation and loneliness for older adults, caregivers, and health care providers. Materials include health information and health care provider flyer. nia.nih.gov



Utilize and promote evidence-based & evidence-informed practices

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there's been an increase in use of telehealth to connect health care professionals to patients remotely. Below is information about additional assessment tools and behavioral interventions to address loneliness and isolation

Goal 2: *Develop a more robust evidence base for effective assessment, prevention, and intervention strategies for social isolation and loneliness;*

Goal 3: *Translate current research into health care practices in order to reduce the negative health impacts of social isolation and loneliness;*

Goal 4: *Improve awareness of the health and medical impacts of social isolation and loneliness across the health care workforce and among members of the public;*

Goal 5: *Strengthen ongoing education and training related to social isolation and loneliness in older adults for the healthcare workforce*

Your local Behavioral Health Specialist can assist! oregonbhi.org/find-a-behavioral-health-specialist/



UCLA Loneliness Scale: A 20-item scale designed to measure one's subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation.



De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale: In this 6-item scale, 3 statements are made about 'emotional loneliness' and 3 about 'social loneliness'.



Social Disconnectedness Scale: This scale is a set of 5 items assessing social network size and a set of 3 items measuring social activity.



PROMIS Social Isolation Scale: This set of person-centered measures evaluates and monitors social health, including isolation and loneliness in adults.



'Oregon Senior Peer Outreach' offers friendly weekly calls to older adults who may be experiencing loneliness, isolation, sadness, grief or loss. Call 1-833-736-4676



The Oregon 'Senior Loneliness Line' is a 24/7 crisis line that will offer help to older adults and their loved ones in the county connect to others. Call 1-503-200-1633



'Friendship Bench' is a private volunteer organization designed to reduce the treatment gap for common mental disorders by creating a sense of belonging in Zimbabwe. Find more information at friendshipbenchzimbabwe.org



'Circle of Friends' a group rehabilitation model for older adults who experience loneliness. Objectives of the groups include making new friends, feeling less lonely, and doing meaningful activities with others. Contact Saint Louis School of Medicine at 1-314-977-8462

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020. Social isolation and loneliness in older adults: Opportunities for the health care system. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25663>.