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## **Loneliness and Social Isolation — Tips for Staying Connected**

Everyone needs social connections to survive and thrive. But as people age, they often find themselves spending more time alone. Being alone may leave older adults more vulnerable to [loneliness and social isolation](#), which can affect their health and well-being. Studies show that loneliness and social isolation are associated with higher risks for health problems such as heart disease, depression, and cognitive decline.

Older African American woman combats loneliness and social isolation by video chatting with

If you are in poor health, you may be more likely to be socially isolated or lonely. If you are socially isolated or feeling lonely, it can put your physical and mental health at risk. Adults who are lonely or socially isolated are less healthy, have longer hospital stays, are readmitted to the hospital more often, and are more likely to die earlier than those with meaningful and supportive social connections.

### **What is the Difference Between Loneliness and Social Isolation?**

The number of older adults age 65 and older is growing, and many are socially isolated and regularly feel lonely. The coronavirus outbreak in 2020 brought even more challenges due to health considerations and the need to practice physical distancing.

Loneliness and social isolation are different, but related. Loneliness is the distressing feeling of being alone or separated. Social isolation is the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly. You can live alone and not feel lonely or socially isolated, and you can feel lonely while being with other people.

Older adults are at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness due to changes in health and social connections that can come with growing older, hearing, vision, and memory loss, disability, trouble getting around, and/or the loss of family and friends.

## How Can Feeling Lonely or Being Isolated Affect Older Adults' Health?

People who are socially isolated or lonely are more likely to be admitted to the emergency room or to a nursing home. Social isolation and loneliness also are associated with higher risks for:

- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Obesity
- Weakened immune function
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Cognitive decline
- Dementia, including Alzheimer's disease
- Death

### ◆ Spread the Word About Social Isolation

[View the Social Isolation and Loneliness Outreach Toolkit](#) for social media images and posts, animated graphics (GIFs), educational materials, and more.

People who are lonely or socially isolated may get too little exercise, drink too much alcohol, smoke, and often don't sleep well, which can further increase the risk of serious health conditions.

People who are lonely experience emotional pain. Losing a sense of connection and community can change the way a person sees the world. Someone experiencing chronic loneliness may feel threatened and mistrustful of others.

Emotional pain can activate the same stress responses in the body as physical pain. When this goes on for a long time, it can lead to chronic inflammation (overactive or prolonged release of factors that can damage tissues) and reduced immunity (ability to fight off disease). This raises your risk of chronic diseases and can leave a person more vulnerable to some infectious diseases.

Social isolation and loneliness may also be bad for brain health. Loneliness and social isolation have been linked to poorer cognitive function and higher risk for dementia, including and especially for [Alzheimer's disease](#). Also, little social activity and being alone most of the time may contribute to a decline in the ability to

perform everyday tasks such as driving, paying bills, taking medicine, and cooking.

#### ◆ **Need Help with Social Isolation or Feeling Lonely?**

The [Eldercare Locator](#) connects the public to services for older adults and their families. This resource seeks to provide assistance for a wide range of issues affecting older Americans, including social isolation and loneliness.

Call the Eldercare Locator at 800-677-1116 or visit <https://eldercare.acl.gov/> to get connected today.

For additional resources on older adults and social isolation and loneliness visit, [Expand Your Circles: Prevent Isolation and Loneliness As You Age](#) (PDF, 4.75M).

#### **How Can You Know Your Risk for Loneliness and Social Isolation?**

Those who find themselves unexpectedly isolated due to the illness of a loved one, separation from friends or family, loss of mobility, worsening vision or hearing problems, disability, or lack of mobility or access to transportation, are at particular risk of loneliness and social isolation.

#### ◆ **Preventing Isolation and Loneliness**

Check out this resource to learn more about loneliness and social isolation and take a quiz to see if you might be at risk for loneliness or social isolation: [Expand Your Circles: Prevent Isolation and Loneliness as you Age](#) (PDF, 4.75M).

You also may be at greater risk if you:

- Live alone
- Can't leave your home
- Had a major loss or life change, such as the death of a spouse or partner, or retirement
- Struggle with money
- Are a caregiver
- Have psychological or cognitive challenges, or depression
- Have limited social support
- Have trouble hearing
- Live in a rural, unsafe, and/or hard-to-reach neighborhood
- Have language barriers where you live

- Experience age, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity discrimination where you live
- Are not meaningfully engaged in activities or are feeling a lack of purpose

People with hearing loss may find it hard to have conversations with friends and family, which can lead to less interaction with people, social isolation, and higher rates of loneliness.

#### ◆ How Can You Talk With Your Doctor About Loneliness and Social Isolation?

If you are feeling isolated or lonely a lot of the time, you may want to tell your doctor or health professional. Talking about your health with your doctor means sharing information about how you feel physically, emotionally, and mentally. Describing your symptoms can help your doctor identify the problem.

Make sure to bring up your concerns. For example, let your doctor know about any major changes or stresses in your life, such as a divorce or the death of a loved one. A doctor who knows about your losses is better able to understand how you are feeling. They can make suggestions that may be helpful to you.

Be open and honest with your doctor about your health habits and what's happening in your life. It will help them to understand your medical conditions and emotional health more fully and recommend the best treatment options for you. Learn more about [talking with your doctor](#).

#### How Can You Stay Connected with Friends and Family?

*Since Carla started having trouble with her vision, she had to give up driving and travels less often. But she still enjoys spending time with her three grandchildren, even though she lives in Maryland and they live across the country in California. Carla reads stories to them on video chat and catches up on how they are doing on social media. She also stays in touch with friends through email and weekly phone calls. Carla feels much happier knowing that she can stay connected with others.*

There are things you can do to help protect yourself or a loved one from the negative effects of loneliness and social isolation. First, it's important to take care of yourself. Try exercising, eating healthy, getting enough sleep (7 to 9 hours), and pursuing activities you enjoy to help manage stress and stay as mentally and physically healthy as possible.

## Loneliness and Social Isolation Infographic

[Share this infographic](#) and help spread the word about staying connected to combat loneliness and social isolation.

It's also important to stay active and connect with others. People who engage in meaningful, productive activities they enjoy with others feel a sense of purpose and tend to live longer. For example, helping others through volunteering helps you feel less lonely and allows you to have a sense of mission and purpose in life, which is linked to better health. Studies show activities like these may help boost your mood and improve your well-being and cognitive function.

Here are some other ideas to help you stay connected. Remember to take steps to help keep you safe and active during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

- Find an activity that you enjoy, restart an old hobby, or take a class to learn something new. You might have fun and meet people with similar interests.
- Schedule time each day to stay in touch with family, friends, and neighbors in person, by email, social media, voice call, or text. Talk with people you trust and share your feelings. Suggest an activity to help nurture and strengthen existing relationships. Sending letters or cards is another good way to keep up friendships.
- Use communication technologies such as video chat, smart speakers, or even companion robots to help keep you engaged and connected.
- If you're not tech-savvy, sign up for an online or in-person class at your local public library or community center to help you learn how to use email or social media.
- Consider adopting a pet if you are able to care for them. Animals can be a source of comfort and may also lower stress and blood pressure.
- Stay physically active and include group exercise, such as joining a walking club or working out with a friend. Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes (2 1/2 hours) of activity a week that makes you breathe hard.
- Introduce yourself to your neighbors.
- Find a faith-based organization where you can deepen your spirituality and engage with others in activities and events.
- Check out resources and programs at your local social service agencies, community and senior centers, and public libraries.
- Join a cause and get involved in your community.

## ◆ Tips For Staying Connected If You Are Living Alone With Dementia

If you or a loved one has dementia and lives alone, family members, friends, or other caregivers may be able to help in different ways.

- **Identify a person you trust, such as a neighbor**, who can visit regularly in-person or via a video call and be an emergency contact.
- **Learn about home- and community-based support and services** from social service agencies, local nonprofits, and Area Agencies on Aging.
- **Stay connected with family and friends** through video chats, email, and social media. If you're not tech savvy, ask for help to learn.
- **Talk with others who share common interests.** Try a support group online or in person. Maybe your community has a memory café you can visit — a safe place to enjoy activities and socialize for people living with memory loss and their families and caregivers.

## For More Information About Loneliness and Social Isolation

### **NIA Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center**

800-438-4380 (toll-free)

[www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers](http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers)

The National Institute on Aging's ADEAR Center offers information and free print publications about Alzheimer's disease and related dementias for families, caregivers, and health professionals. ADEAR Center staff answer telephone, email, and written requests and make referrals to local and national resources.

### **AmeriCorps Seniors**

800-942-2677

[www.americorps.gov/serve/americorps-seniors](http://www.americorps.gov/serve/americorps-seniors)

### **Eldercare Locator**

800-677-1116 (toll-free)

[www.eldercare.acl.gov](http://www.eldercare.acl.gov)

### **AARP**

888-687-2277 (toll-free)

877-434-7598 (TTY/toll-free)

[www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)

**Alzheimer's Association**

800-272-3900 (toll-free)

866-403-3073 (TTY/toll-free)

[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

**Connect2Affect**

[www.connect2affect.org](http://www.connect2affect.org)

**Family Caregiver Alliance**

800-445-8106 (toll-free)

[www.caregiver.org](http://www.caregiver.org)

**Meals on Wheels America**

888-998-6325 (toll-free)

[www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org](http://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org)

**National Association of Area Agencies on Aging**

202-872-0888

[www.n4a.org](http://www.n4a.org)

**National Council on Aging**

571-527-3900

[www.ncoa.org](http://www.ncoa.org)

**SilverSneakers**

866-584-7389

[www.silversneakers.com](http://www.silversneakers.com)

**YMCA**

800-872-9622

[www.ymca.net](http://www.ymca.net)

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<https://www.nia.nih.gov>

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