Solution to prevent social isolation for the elderly

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Phase: Ideation

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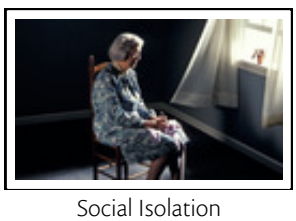
sander-barake 17.04.2015

Edit

Solution to prevent social isolation for the elderly

The population of many western countries is aging rapidly. People are getting older and life expectancy is increasing.

One of the major problems arising in the segment is social isolation. The elderly are required to stay longer at home since the healthcare budgets are limited. They become more dependent on the care of friend and family, however society is moving in an opposite direction



Social Isolation

Comments

markstoutjesdijk 17.04.2015

I like it. Contributing factors for isolation that I can think of right now, in two minutes:

- Limited mobility
- Technology is moving way too fast (e.g. buy a train ticket in NL!)
- Friends and family are dying -> circle of friends contracts

Other thoughts.

The fact that society recognizes the special needs of elderly is sometimes also an annoying handicap, if the older person is actually doing quite well and really does not need all the (well-intended) help.

(Dutch) politics wants to move towards "participatory care" instead of the more provisionary type that we used to have. But are people really ready to spend significant time on care of their family and friends? Like Sander said, society may be moving the other way!

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Like

vikrantvks 17.04.2015

It is really a nice topic. This issue really involves all and will touches everyone's life.

I agree with Mark's comment that Society is moving the other way, because people now think they are too busy in their hectic life.

Fact is forgotten that "way we treat our parents, our children will also treat us same way".

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Like

vikrantvks 17.04.2015

Just to add..

Another challenge in this respect is that, children in many cases have now moved to different places to find job. So they really can not come daily to take care of their parents. If they stay really far away then only way can be if parents want to move with them.

Many a times I have seen that elderly wants to leave at the place where they have spent most of their life.

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Like

sander-barake 28.04.2015

Moderator

http://www.aplaceformom.com/blog/help-seniors-avoi...

1. Make Transportation Available

Lack of adequate transportation is a primary cause of a social isolation. Because many seniors do not drive, this is a big issue for them, so anything that helps seniors get around and make independent choices about travel promotes their social health. On the level of society, creating a solid public transportation infrastructure and providing

special transportation options to seniors and disabled people will help promote their social integration. For example, our blog recently reported that giving free buses to seniors promotes their health. On the level of our family, offering rides to older loved ones and helping them to learn to use public transportation will help them maintain social connections and a healthy sense of independence.

2. Promote Sense of Purpose

Seniors with a sense of purpose or hobbies that really interest them are less likely to succumb to the negative effects of social isolation. Besides providing a sense of purpose, many hobbies and interests are inherently social in nature. Anything that involves a group, for example, playing bridge, could be said to be socially healthy. If a senior is bereft of ideas for what to do, there are always planned events at the local senior center. Volunteering is also great way of maintaining and expressing a sense of purpose. Encouraging seniors to remain active in their hobbies and interests, and providing them opportunities to volunteer can help them maintain their sense of purpose and keep them from becoming isolated and lonely.

3. Encourage Religious Seniors to Maintain Attendance at their Places of Worship

For seniors who have been regular churchgoers, this weekly social connection has been shown to be quite beneficial. Nicholson's review observed that many studies have shown the benefits of churchgoing for seniors: "Those frequently attending religious services have been found to have lower mortality rates than those with infrequent attendance." Older church goers not only benefit from the social interaction and sense of purpose that weekly worship provides, but they also benefit from the watchful eye of other churchgoers, who are likely to recognize a decline in an isolated senior that may have gone unnoticed otherwise.

4. Give a Senior a Pet or Plant to Take Care Of

Many experts note that the act of nurturing can relieve feelings of social isolation. In the peer reviewed paper "Emotional Benefits of Dog Ownership", Eve Beals succinctly outlines the benefits of nurturing a pet: "Pet owners remain engaged socially, have less depression, suffer less loneliness, feel more secure, have more motivation for constructive use of time and require less medication that non-pet owners. Animal companionship facilitates establishing friends, is a social lubricant, gives a reason to get up in the morning and is an icebreaker." Obviously, you would need to make certain that the senior is capable and willing to properly care for the pet before giving a pet as a gift. Assuming the senior is capable of caring for a pet, nurturing and caring for an

animal companion can be quite beneficial. Even tending a garden can satisfy our nurturing drive, so giving a senior a plant or gardening supplies as a gift can be beneficial too.

5. Encourage a Positive Body Image

It's not just young women and girls who can have social or health issues prompted by body image concerns. Nicholson's review notes that some research has shown that many older adults avoid social interaction because of a poor body image, "… Individuals with a poor body image attributable to being overweight may decrease or cease interactions with their social networks to the point where they could be at risk for social isolation. For example, individuals who are overweight may be self-conscious or embarrassed, and, therefore, less likely to engage in their social networks." Compliments and positive comments can go a long way to boosting the self-esteem of seniors. Similarly, discouraging seniors from fretting over their appearance or catastrophizing the cosmetic effects of aging may help them avoid becoming self-conscious to the point that they avoid social interactions. For seniors who are genuinely overweight, addressing the root problem by encouraging weight loss through healthy eating and exercise can be helpful too, but always be positive and sensitive in efforts to encourage older loved ones to lose weight.

6. Encourage Hearing and Vision Tests

Seniors with undiagnosed or untreated hearing problems may avoid social situations because of embarrassment and difficulty communicating. Encourage seniors to have their hearing checked and hearing problems treated. A hearing aid may be the only barrier between a senior and better social health. Vision tests are important too as sight problems "limit opportunities for social interactions with others" according Nicholson's landmark review on social isolation research.

7. Make Adaptive Technologies Available

Adaptive technologies, ranging from walkers to the above mentioned hearing aids, help seniors to compensate for age related deficits and deficiencies that can impede social interaction. Many seniors do not take full advantage of these devices. Sometimes they may be embarrassed because they don't want to look or feel old. In other cases, the device may be overly expensive and not covered by insurance. Both as a society and in our own families we can encourage and facilitate the use of adaptive aids that make it possible for seniors to have active and involved social lives.

8. Notify Neighbors

Because socially isolated seniors may be vulnerable to a variety of unexpected problems and may have underlying issues such as dementia, their loved ones should consider informing members of their loved one's community that there is a vulnerable adult in the neighborhood. Trusted neighbors within a block radius or so should be introduced to the senior if feasible, informed about any particular issues the senior may have, and asked to keep a friendly eye out in case anything seems amiss.

9. Encourage Dining with Others

The act of eating with others is inherently social. In Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective, Robin Fox writes that eating is "a profoundly social urge. Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is also an occasion for sharing, for distributing and giving, for the expressing of altruism, whether from parents to children, children to in-laws, or anyone to visitors and strangers." Encourage seniors to share a meal with others whenever possible, whether it's with a church group, the local senior center, or a friendly café or diner. Dining with others is also likely to help promote better nutrition, which is crucial for the elderly.

10. Address Incontinence Issues

For obvious reasons, a senior who experiences incontinence may be hesitant to leave their home and could become isolated. When family caregivers and health professionals make sure that incontinence issues are appropriately addresses, for example through medications and incontinence supplies, incontinent seniors can have a better opportunity to recognize their social potentials and live life without embarrassment and fear of going into public..

11. Give a Hug

There's nothing like a hug from grandma. And research has shown that friendly platonic touching from friends and family, like hand holding or hugging, can lower stress and promote feelings of well-being. On the other hand, people deprived of touch can experience decreased well-being. So even if you or your older relatives are not the touchy-feely types, at the very least weave a friendly hug into your greetings and farewells.

12. Give Extra Support to Seniors Who Have Recently Lost a Spouse

Older adults may be at highest risk for becoming socially isolated during the period after a spouse has passed away. When you've shared your life with a beloved spouse and companion for decades, it can be like losing the foundation of your existence when that person dies. For this reason, it's important to provide extra emotional and social support to recent widows and widowers while they are grieving. Do more than bring flowers; go the extra mile and spend more time with the senior in the days and weeks following his or her loss. This can make all the difference for the bereaved senior's well-being, and it helps to encourage a healthy grieving process rather than a spiral into prolonged depression and isolation.

13. Identification of Socially Isolated Seniors by Public Health Professionals
Often family members will be the first to notice when social isolation is affecting a senior's well-being, but not all seniors have the benefit of loved ones who live nearby and can check on their well-being. For this reason, public health professionals should be on the lookout for signs of social isolation problems in their clients and patients so that appropriate interventions can be arranged. After all, nothing can be done to help socially isolated seniors if no one recognizes that they are socially isolated. Beck Squires notes in an article for AARP that health professionals should be especially aware of social isolation in particular groups of older adults, such as gay and lesbian seniors who are unlikely to have grown-children who can help oversee their well-being or spot signs of social isolation.

14. Help Out a Caregiver in Your Life
Family caregivers who are helping to care for an elderly loved one probably don't consider themselves seniors and are also probably more concerned about the social well-being of the person they are caring for than their own social well-being. But many caregivers are 50+ and caregiving itself can actually trigger social isolation. In Squires' AARP article she summarizes the social and health risks of caregiving: "Caregivers often work by themselves, and more than half (53%) say they have less time for friends and family. All too often, they don't call doctors when they are sick, and they have little or no time to exercise or eat well. Studies show that up to 70% of caregivers have clinically significant symptoms of depression." So if you are a caregiver, remember to take care yourself. It's not just the person you are caring for who's at risk of social isolation, it is you. And if you know a caregiver, or a loved one in your family shoulders the burden of caregiving for an elderly family member, take whatever steps you can to make that person's life easier and to allow them to have a social life of their own.

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Like

sander-barake 29.04.2015

Moderator

http://www.aplaceformom.com/blog/10-17-14-facts-ab...

Here are 20 facts about senior isolation to help you stay informed:

1. Senior isolation increases the risk of mortality.
According to a 2012 study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, both social isolation and loneliness are associated with a higher risk of mortality in adults aged 52 and older.

One possible explanation: “People who live alone or lack social contacts may be at increased risk of death if acute symptoms develop, because there is less of a network of confidantes to prompt medical attention.” Efforts to reduce isolation are the key to addressing the issue of mortality, said the study’s authors.

2. Feelings of loneliness can negatively affect both physical and mental health.
Regardless of the facts of a person’s isolation, seniors who feel lonely and isolated are more likely to report also having poor physical and/or mental health, as reported in a 2009 study using data from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project.

Connecting seniors with social resources, such as senior centers and meal delivery programs, is one way to combat subjective feelings of isolation.

3. Perceived loneliness contributes to cognitive decline and risk of dementia.
Dr. John Cacioppo, a neuroscientist and psychologist at the University of Chicago, has been studying social isolation for 30 years. One frightening finding is that feelings of loneliness are linked to poor cognitive performance and quicker cognitive decline.

We evolved to be a social species, says Dr. Cacioppo – it’s hard-wired into our brains, and when we don’t meet that need, it can have physical and neurological effects.

4. Social isolation makes seniors more vulnerable to elder abuse.
Many studies show a connection between social isolation and higher rates of elder abuse, reports the National Center on Elder Abuse. Whether this is because isolated adults are more likely to fall victim to abuse, or a result of abusers attempting to isolate the elders from others to minimize risk of discovery, researchers aren't certain.

A critical strategy for reducing elder abuse is speaking up: abuse, neglect and exploitation often go unreported. As for prevention, maintaining connections with senior loved ones helps us ensure their safety.

5. LGBT seniors are much more likely to be socially isolated.
LGBT seniors are twice as likely to live alone, according to SAGE (Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders); they are more likely to be single and they are less likely to have children – and they are more likely to be estranged from their biological families.

Stigma and discrimination are major roadblocks to support for LGBT seniors, but there are more and more community groups and online resources devoted to helping these elders avoid isolation.

6. Social isolation in seniors is linked to long-term illness.
In the PNAS study mentioned above, illnesses and conditions such as chronic lung disease, arthritis, impaired mobility, and depression were associated with social isolation. Ensuring appropriate care for our loved ones' illnesses can help prevent this isolation.

For homebound seniors, phone calls and visits can be a critical part of connecting with loved ones. Others may find that moving to an assisted living community addresses both issues – the need for ongoing care and the desire for companionship.

7. Loneliness in seniors is a major risk factor for depression.
Numerous studies over the past decade have shown that feeling loneliness is associated with more depressive symptoms in both middle-aged and older adults.

One important first step is recognizing those feelings of loneliness, isolation and depression and seeking treatment – whether it's on your own behalf or for the sake of a loved one.

8. Loneliness causes high blood pressure.

A 2010 study in Psychology and Aging indicated a direct relationship between loneliness in older adults and increases in systolic blood pressure over a 4-year period. These increases were independent of race, ethnicity, gender, and other possible contributing factors.

Early interventions for loneliness, say the study's authors, may be key to preventing both the isolation and associated health risks.

9. Socially isolated seniors are more pessimistic about the future.
According to the National Council on Aging, socially isolated seniors are more likely to predict their quality of life will get worse over the next 5-10 years, are more concerned about needing help from community programs as they get older, and are more likely to express concerns about aging in place.

The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) says community-based programs and services are critical in helping ward off potential problems and improving quality of life for older people.

10. Physical and geographic isolation often leads to social isolation.
"One in six seniors living alone in the United States faces physical, cultural, and/or geographical barriers that isolate them from their peers and communities," reports the National Council on Aging. "This isolation can prevent them from receiving benefits and services that can improve their economic security and their ability to live healthy, independent lives."

Referring isolated older adults to senior centers, activity programs, and transportation services can go a long way toward creating valuable connections and reducing isolation.

11. Isolated seniors are more likely to need long-term care.
Loneliness and social isolation are major predictors of seniors utilizing home care, as well as entering nursing homes, according to a 2004 report from the Children's, Women's and Seniors Health Branch, British Columbia Ministry of Health.

The positive angle of these findings, says the report, is that using long-term health care services can in itself connect seniors with much-needed support. Particularly for seniors in rural areas, entering a care facility may provide companionship and social contact.

12. Loss of a spouse is a major risk factor for loneliness and isolation.
Losing a spouse, an event which becomes more common as people enter older age, has been shown by numerous studies to increase seniors' vulnerability to emotional and social isolation, says the same report from the British Columbia Ministry of Health. Besides the loneliness brought on by bereavement, the loss of a partner may also mean the loss of social interactions that were facilitated by being part of a couple.

Ensuring seniors have access to family and friendship support can help alleviate this loneliness.

13. Transportation challenges can lead to social isolation.
According to the AARP, "life expectancy exceeds safe driving expectancy after age 70 by about six years for men and 10 years for women." Yet, 41% of seniors do not feel that the transportation support in their community is adequate, says the NCOA.

Having access to adequate public transportation or other senior transportation services is key to seniors' accessing programs and resources, as well as their feelings of connectedness and independence.

14. Caregivers of the elderly are also at risk for social isolation.
Being a family caregiver is an enormous responsibility, whether you are caring for a parent, spouse, or other relative. When that person has Alzheimer's disease, dementia, or a physical impairment, the caregiver may feel even less able to set aside his or her caregiving duties to attend to social relationships they previously enjoyed. This can trigger loneliness and depression.

Seeking support, caring for yourself, and even looking for temporary respite care can help ward off caregiver loneliness and restore your sense of connection.

15. Loneliness can be contagious.
Studies have found that loneliness has a tendency to spread from person to person, due to negative social interactions and other factors. In other words, when one person is lonely, that loneliness is more likely to spread to friends or contacts of the lonely individual. Making things even worse, people have a tendency to further isolate people who are lonely because we have evolved to avoid threats to our social cohesion.

It's a complicated situation, and simply telling seniors to engage in more social activities may not be enough. Considering our loved ones' needs as individuals is a

valuable first step to figuring out how to prevent or combat isolation.

16. Lonely people are more likely to engage in unhealthy behavior.
A 2011 study using data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) found that people who are socially isolated or lonely are also more likely to report risky health behaviors such as poor diet, lack of physical activity, and smoking. Conversely, social support can help encourage seniors to eat well, exercise, and live healthy lifestyles.

Living in a community situation can be an effective barrier to loneliness, and most senior communities specifically promote wellness through diet and exercise programs.

17. Volunteering can reduce social isolation and loneliness in seniors.
We all know that volunteering is a rewarding activity, and seniors have a unique skill set and oodles of life experience to contribute to their communities. It can also boost longevity and contribute to mental health and well-being, and it ensures that seniors have a source of social connection.

There are plenty of opportunities tailor-made for seniors interested in volunteering.

18. Feeling isolated? Take a class.
A review of studies looking at various types of interventions on senior loneliness found that the most effective programs for combating isolation had an educational or training component: for instance, classes on health-related topics, computer training, or exercise classes.

19. Technology can help senior isolation – but not always.
Even though modern technology provides us with more opportunities than ever for keeping in touch, sometimes the result is that we feel lonelier than ever. The key to finding technological interventions that really do help, says Health Quality Ontario, is matching those interventions to the specific needs of individual seniors.

One simple strategy that does help: for seniors with hearing loss, simply providing a hearing aid can improve communication and reduce loneliness. Phone contact and Web-based support programs were less consistent in their effectiveness, but for some, they might provide a lifeline.

20. Physical activity reduces senior isolation.

Group exercise programs, it turns out, are a wonderfully effective way to reduce isolation and loneliness in seniors – and of course they have the added benefit of being great for physical and mental health. In one study, discussed by Health Quality Ontario, seniors reported greater well-being regardless of whether the activity was aerobic or lower-impact, like stretching.

Senior isolation is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Getting the facts can help us prevent loneliness in our senior loved ones as they face the life changes of aging.

Have you or a loved one suffered from loneliness or social isolation during the aging process? What, in your opinion, is the most helpful intervention for reducing isolation? Join the discussion in the comments below.

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Like

lorenzoferi 29.04.2015

Hey guys, thanks for the contribution. Given you guys already covered quite well the background on what are the issues, I decided to extend my focus on what could be possible solutions / what smart ideas are out there. There's a lot you can find when you google for "ideas and initiatives for elderly care", this is in itself a positive sign!

As said, I found quite some stuff, let me cluster it for you:

> Initiatives/ideas/good examples from around the world on good elderly case. It looks like Japan and the Nordic countries are a notch ahead.

http://www.sigeneration.ca/innovations-in-elder-ca...

http://koreisha.nl/?p=205

> there seems to be a spur of innovation on technologies for improved elderly living

http://www.rd.com/advice/smart-tech-top-10-innovat...

> there are competitions around the world, to stimulate thinking and ideas aroudn this wicked problem

http://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/201...

http://www.newtoolsforhealth.com/press/news/75-inn...

> Lastly, and probably the smartest idea I found.... What is the best engine to address unaddressed needs/problems? The answer: business and entrepreneurship! So perhaps the very best idea to address the elderly care would be to stimulate worldwide entrepreneurs to address the issue. This could be done with Natioanl/International grants to fund ventures in this area. One limitation to this approach: it may lead to a technology solution and ignore social solutions (e.g. a change in social paradigm whereby families prioritize caring for the own elders)

http://www.entrepreneur.com/article/80780

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Unlike

satoshiguchi 30.04.2015

Yes, Lorenzo, Japan is advanced country for aging society.

Sander's point is also helpful for me to select the issues to address.

10. Physical and geographic isolation often leads to social isolation.

The point is which is better to communicate more often, families living far area or neighbors living closer. More often communication with kids and/or youth can be the idea. I have one Dutch and one Japanese example.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/dutch-retireme...

http://en.rocketnews24.com/2015/02/01/yoro-shisets...

Simply, if people needs touching communication, this device is interesting...

http://tactilu.com/

13. Transportation challenges can lead to social isolation.

Some thing like transportation between taxi and bus can be the idea for people in isolated area. One Finland, one Japanese example.

http://www.wired.com/2013/10/on-demand-public-tran...

http://www.mlit.go.jp/road/ITS/2002HBook/section2/...

20. Physical activity reduces senior isolation.

ASICS started providing the customized training program for elderly people to prevent from weakening body. Sorry, website is in Japanese..

http://www.asics.co.jp/tryus/training

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Like

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