

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

# Loneliness and Isolation in Older Adults

Loneliness and social isolation significantly impact the mental and physical health of older adults, often leading to severe outcomes, including increased suicide risk. The U.S. Census Bureau reports approximately 27% of adults aged 65 and older live alone, but loneliness can affect anyone without meaningful social connections.<sup>1</sup>

## Health Risks of Loneliness and Isolation

Loneliness and social isolation are associated with severe health risks. Research shows social isolation can significantly increase the risk of premature death, comparable to risks posed by smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity. Moreover, loneliness is linked to a 50% increased risk of dementia, a 29% increased risk of heart disease, and a 32% increased risk of stroke. It also correlates with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.<sup>2</sup>

## Ways to Improve Mental Health

According to the National Council on Aging, there are ways to combat loneliness and protect the mental health of an older loved one, including:<sup>3</sup>

### Communicating

Many seniors, particularly those with health or mobility issues, can go days without meaningful interaction with anyone. Regularly scheduled conversations, in person or virtual, can foster a sense of connection and purpose. Engaging older adults in dialogue about their experiences and advice can further enhance their sense of belonging and value.

### Encouraging Social Connections

Active participation in social activities is an effective strategy to combat loneliness. Places of worship and local organizations like senior centers or public libraries offer numerous opportunities for social engagement. Volunteering is particularly beneficial, as it provides a dual advantage: social interaction and a sense of purpose that can significantly improve mood and mental health.

### How to talk with a doctor about loneliness and social isolation

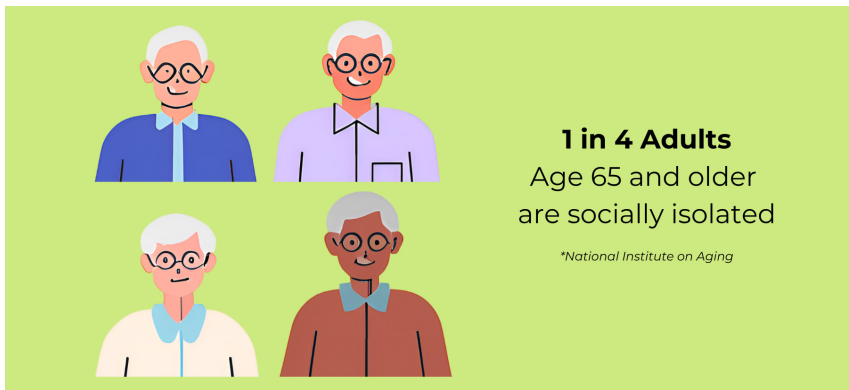
If you are feeling isolated or lonely a lot of the time, you may want to tell your doctor or health professional.

- Share information about how you feel physically, emotionally, and mentally.
- Describe your symptoms to help your doctor identify the problem.
- Let your doctor know about any major changes or stresses in your life, such as a divorce or the death of a loved one.
- Be open and honest with your doctor about your health habits and what's happening in your life.

*Source: National Institute on Aging. Loneliness and Social Isolation — Tips for Staying Connected*

## Finding New Interests

Engaging in interests can also mitigate feelings of loneliness. Identifying and revisiting past hobbies or exploring new ones can lead to social interactions through clubs and groups, both in-person and online. Adult education classes offer opportunities to learn new skills and meet people with similar interests. For those proficient in certain crafts, teaching can be an excellent way to stay engaged and connected. Additionally, mentorship is an outlet to explore. Pairing older adults with younger people for mentorship can foster meaningful relationships.



## Healthcare Systems' Role

Healthcare systems play a pivotal role in identifying and addressing loneliness among older adults. Given that nearly all adults aged 50 and older interact with healthcare providers, these encounters present opportunities to assess and mitigate loneliness. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) recommends clinicians periodically evaluate patients for social isolation and loneliness, using tools such as the Berkman-Syme Social Network Index and the UCLA Loneliness Scale. Connecting patients with community resources can significantly improve their social well-being and overall health.

## Conclusion

Combating loneliness and preventing suicide in older adults requires a multifaceted approach, involving regular communication, social engagement, hobbies, continuous support, and healthcare interventions. By leveraging these strategies and resources, we can significantly enhance the quality of life and mental health of older adults, ultimately reducing the risks associated with loneliness and isolation.

### Resources

- Mental Health America  
[www.mhanational.org](http://www.mhanational.org).
- National Institute on Aging  
[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov).
- Ohio Department of Aging  
[aging.ohio.gov](http://aging.ohio.gov).

### References

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement. <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/cps/cps-asec.html>. Accessed June 17, 2024
- 2 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System. 2020. <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/> Accessed June 17, 2024
- 3 National Council on Aging. Four Steps to Combat Loneliness in Seniors During the Holiday and Beyond. <https://www.ncoa.org/article/four-steps-to-combat-loneliness-in-seniors-during-the-holiday-and-beyond> Accessed June 17, 2024

### ABOUT OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



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