

Loneliness in Older Adults

Mental Well-Being

Although aging isn't the only cause for social isolation and loneliness, older adults are more likely to experience them. Retirement can narrow social networks, making it harder to see former colleagues or meet new people. Family and friends may have moved or passed away. Changes in health may make getting out more difficult.

Social isolation and loneliness are associated with a wide range of physical and mental health problems, including depression, dementia, heart disease, and even premature death, according to [research reported by the National Institute on Aging](#).

Social support is clearly an important part of aging well. But keep in mind that everyone's needs for human interaction are different. That is, social isolation, as measured by the amount of contact with friends and family, does not necessarily lead to loneliness, which is a feeling. Some individuals may want to spend hours with other people every day, whereas others are perfectly content to spend time alone. In addition, even people who live with someone else can still feel lonely. And some people may not be comfortable sharing all their thoughts and feelings with the person they see every day.

If you suspect your loved one is socially isolated or feels lonely, talk with them about it. Their feelings are your best guide to what's going on and how to deal with it effectively. In addition, be aware of the following risk factors for social isolation and loneliness, as well as strategies for dealing with these risk factors.

When anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues interfere with your recovery at home, behavioral health support can help.

[Behavioral Health Services](#)

Risk Factors for Social Isolation and Loneliness

Poor Overall Health and Well-Being

How is your loved one's overall health and well-being? Is your loved one frail? Do they have an injury? Impaired mobility can lead to isolation from friends and family. A [home health aide](#) can help your loved one with getting out of bed and moving around the house. An aide can also assist with daily tasks so that your loved one has more time to spend with others. If your loved one can no longer drive, encourage [friends and family to visit your loved one at their home](#), so that they don't have to make a trip. You can coordinate with friends and family so that everyone can visit at the same time or one at a time depending on schedules and limited space in the home.

Chronic Conditions

Does your loved one have a chronic condition or an illness that makes spending time with them difficult? For example, conditions like [COPD can make it harder for your loved one to breathe](#) and limit conversation. [Talking to someone with Alzheimer's disease](#) or another type of dementia can be tough. They may ask the same questions over and over, or they may get frustrated while trying to talk with you. Finding ways to communicate with a loved one who has dementia can make it easier to spend time with them, which will help them feel less lonely.

Lack of Contact with Family and Friends

Do you or your other family members live far away from your loved one? Even if you can't visit in person, you can help your loved one feel less lonely with something as simple as a phone call. In addition, if they are comfortable using messaging apps like Facebook or WhatsApp, you can keep in touch with them that way. Or set up [family meetings either by phone or over Zoom or Google Meet](#). Having virtual get-togethers with everyone in the family can help your loved one feel connected.

Money Issues

Does your loved one have enough money to buy the food they need and pay for housing and health care? Limited income can mean that people have fewer options for social activities. Sorting out finances can help them budget for going out. If your loved one is having trouble paying for health care, [programs like Medicare and Medicaid can make it more affordable](#). If your loved one is eligible for either or both, you can help them enroll.

Sexual Orientation

Older adults who are LGBTQ+ are much more likely than others to live alone, to have no children, and to be estranged from their biological families. They also tend to have higher disability rates, and they often face economic insecurity. They may be hesitant to go to a doctor because of the fear of discrimination or because they have experienced higher barriers for access to health care. They may be [caregiving for someone else while needing care themselves](#).

One way you can help is by remembering to use their preferred pronouns. Some LGBTQ+ older adults may feel that they can't be their authentic selves around others, so creating a safe, nonjudgmental space when talking with a loved one who is LGBTQ+ is important.

Getting Expert Help

If your loved one is experiencing social isolation or feeling lonely, they may need more support than phone calls or family get-togethers can provide. They may need help from a mental health professional such as a licensed counselor or therapist.

If you or your loved one has never talked with a counselor or therapist before, you might wonder what they do. They can help your loved one:

- Talk through and understand their emotions
- Develop coping strategies to handle loneliness, depression, and anxiety
- Improve communication skills

Talking to a counselor or therapist can be beneficial for anyone. Your loved one doesn't have to have a specific mental health diagnosis to talk to a professional about their situation.

Your loved one may be nervous about sharing their feelings, but you can remind them that mental health professionals are trained to help people get through tough times by developing strategies and skills that can make life easier.

Source: <https://www.vnshealth.org/patient-family-support/health-library/loneliness-in-older-adults/>

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