



# LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN OLDER ADULTS

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*It's paradoxical that the idea of living a long life appeals to everyone, but the idea of getting old doesn't appeal to anyone.*

[Andy Rooney](#)

# A Growing Epidemic

Even before the pandemic loneliness and social isolation have been considered health risks for older adults, especially those in rural communities and long-term care facilities. But COVID-19 has exacerbated the risk to a public health crisis.

# What is loneliness?

Loneliness refers to the perception of social isolation or the subjective feeling of being lonely. Although those who lack social contact may feel lonely, social isolation and loneliness often are not significantly correlated.

Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System (2020)

# What is social isolation?

Social isolation and loneliness represent distinct phenomena. Social isolation typically refers to the objective lack of (or limited) social contact with others and is marked by a person having few social network ties, having infrequent social contact, or, potentially, living alone.

Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System (2020)



# The COVID Conundrum



We did have to choose between protecting the medically fragile, higher risk older adults from the Coronavirus and cutting them off from outside support and connection, which we know is *vital* to their overall well-being?



# What Else is Killing Our Older Adults?





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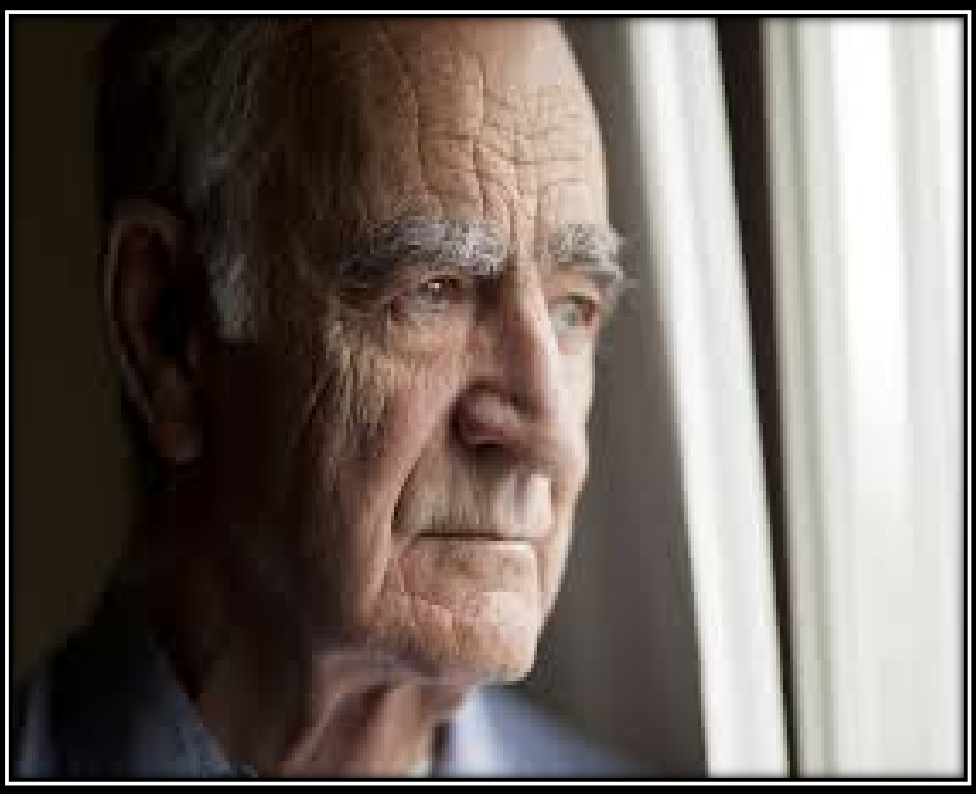
A recent body of evidence shows that social isolation and loneliness significantly increase a person's risk of mortality from all causes, potentially rivaling the risks of smoking, obesity and high blood pressure. Social isolation and loneliness are also associated with higher rates of clinically significant depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and risk for dementia.

# Multifaceted Crisis?

There is more than mental health at stake. Isolation and loneliness are associated with a **50%** increased risk of developing dementia, a **32%** increased risk of stroke, and a nearly fourfold increased risk of death among heart failure patients.



# On Their Own?



Nursing homes and assisted living, and memory care facilities are just beginning to open up to visitors. However, the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and the CDC is still issuing guidance on visitors and nonessential personnel. This is primarily due to virus variants and breakthrough cases.

# What Do We Need?

## **Ongoing evaluation of residents using evidence-based tools:**

Rural communities, nursing homes, assisted living, memory care, independent living communities.

Baseline then every three months.

## **Training for family and professional caregivers (employees):**

To administer evaluations.

To recognize symptoms: depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, behavioral and physical changes, weight gain or loss, excess sleeping, memory issues...

# Loneliness Scales

## The Campaign to End Loneliness Measurement Tool

The main purpose of this tool is to measure the change that happens as a result of an intervention to address loneliness.

Length:	3 Questions
Language:	Positive wording
Developed for:	Service Providers
Mention loneliness?	No
Best if:	you want a short and sensitively-worded tool that is easy to use.

Perlman, D. and Peplau, L. A. Chapter 2: Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness, in Duck and Gilmour (eds.) 1981. Personal Relationships in Disorder. London: Academic Press.



# Loneliness Scales

## The De Jong Gierveld 6-Item Loneliness Scale

The Gierveld scale was designed for use with older people, to focus on both emotional and social loneliness and give insight into why someone might be experiencing loneliness.

Length:	6 Questions
Language:	Positive and negative wording
Developed for:	Researchers
Mention loneliness?	No
Best if:	you want an academically rigorous tool that distinguishes between different causes of loneliness.

de Jong Gierveld, J. and van Tilburg, T. 2006. 6-Item Scale for Overall, Emotional, and Social Loneliness: Confirmatory Tests on Survey Data Research on Ageing 28(5) pp. 582-598

# Loneliness Scales

## The UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale

Both the longer (11 question) and shorter (3 question) versions of the UCLA loneliness scale are widely used across the world. Has been found to be accurate when it is part of a self-completed questionnaire, and when an interviewer asks questions over the phone.

Length:	3 Questions
Language:	Negative wording
Developed for:	Service Providers
Mention loneliness?	No
Best if:	you want a short academically rigorous tool with a simple scoring system

Victor, C., Scambler, S., Bond, J. and Bowling, A. 2001. Being alone in later life: loneliness, social isolation and living alone. *Reviews in Clinical Gerontology* 10(04) pp. 407 - 417

# Loneliness Scales

## Single-item questions

A single-item measure of loneliness has benefits. It is short, asks directly about the issue of interest and is easy to administer and score. Single questions are more appropriate with an older age group, particularly if someone is experiencing cognitive decline or has difficulty communicating.

Length:	1 Question
Language:	Negative wording
Developed for:	Researchers/service providers
Mention loneliness?	Yes
Best if:	you want to get to the heart of the issue with just one question

Step toe, A., Shankar, A., Demakakos, P. and Wardle, J. 2013. Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 110(15) pp.5797–5801

# Interventions

NOT ALL OLDER ADULTS EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY



# Interventions

Teach technology

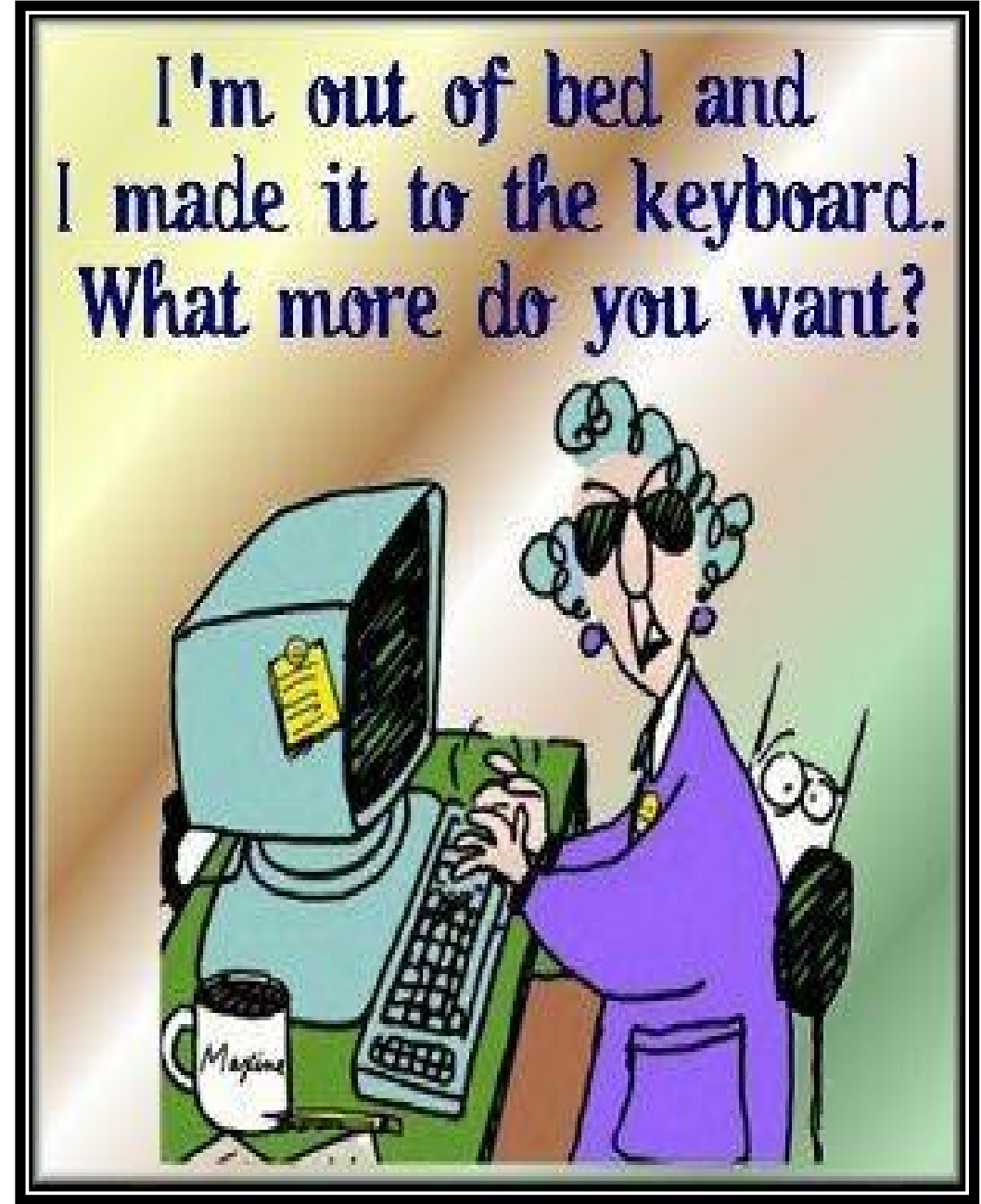
Teach social media platforms

Provide data networks & internet services

Hardware-tablets, phones, laptops

The Connectors, Voice activated technology

Train staff and personal caregivers





# Attitude Affects Aging

“We will all grow older and if negative attitudes towards aging are carried throughout our lives they can have a measurable detrimental, effect on our mental, physical and cognitive health.”

Deirdre Robertson, PhD



2016, “Negative Perceptions of Aging Modify the Association Between Frailty and Cognitive Function in Older Adults, journal of Personality and Individual Differences”

# Interventions

Be creative!

Time Slips

Now Playing Utah

One Day University

AARP Staying Sharp

Senior Planet

AARP Get Moving

Next Avenue

Covia

8 Dimensions of Wellness

iHeart Radio Happiness Podcast

Playing for Change

Utah Symphony

Rick Steves Travelogues

Lifelong Learning at the U

Osher Classes

Mindfulness Training

Meet Me at MOMA

Louisville Orchestra

Natural History Museum

UMFA



**A season of loneliness and  
isolation is when the  
caterpillar gets its wings.  
Remember that next time  
you feel alone.**

Mandy Hale

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