

Helping Older Adults Who Are Isolated or Lonely

Being alone and feeling lonely are different, but related

Social Isolation. Being alone is often manageable and unassociated with negative feelings. However, extended periods of isolation can have longterm effects on mental and physical health. Social isolation is defined as “objectively, having few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interactions” and has been identified as a threat to public health by the **U.S. Surgeon General**.

Loneliness is a feeling. Loneliness is the distressing feeling when people feel they don't have enough social connection. People who feel lonely can feel sad, empty, hopeless, and isolated. One can feel lonely even in a group of people.



Older adulthood, loss, and loneliness

As we age, we are more likely to experience loss. Different types of losses can contribute to isolation and feelings of loneliness.

- **Loss of physical health or mobility**– Managing medical conditions can affect wellbeing, functioning, and social engagement. Some health issues may make it challenging to walk or drive safely, which can limit one's ability to socialize.
- **Loss of life roles**– In their post-work years, people may find that their social interaction decreases. Changes in family roles can also contribute to loneliness. For example, becoming a caregiver to a loved-one can limit social engagement.

- **Loss of family and friends**– With age, we are more likely to lose loved-ones and navigate grief. The loss of a spouse or life partner is one of the most impactful losses experienced by older adults and can lead to loneliness or isolation. It is important to note that many older adults provide care for loved ones who have experienced losses in health and function. Caregivers often report isolation and loneliness due to care responsibilities that pose as barriers to socialization.

Role of peer support specialists

Peer supporters help isolated or lonely older adults feel more connected. They support older adults in building support networks and social activities, listening, building connection, and providing strategies and resources. Peer supporters approach relationships with an attitude of “working with” and not “working for” the older adult, which means that they assist in helping older adults reach their own personal goals.

Ways to ask older adults about loneliness or isolation

Loneliness and isolation can be challenging topics. How a peer supporter approaches this topic may differ based on age differences between the peer supporter and the older adult. When there is a relative age match, the peer might highlight their shared experience and mutuality of helping each other feel connected. When the peer supporter is younger, they should approach the topic with curiosity about the older adult’s life experience and ask for permission to offer suggestions. The overall goal is to foster connection and relationships. Here are some ways to start the conversation.

- Who do you usually talk with during the day?
- Do you have family or friends nearby? How often do you get to see them?
- So, tell me about the people in your life.
- How do you spend a typical day? How do you socialize with others?
- Do you ever feel lonely or left out?
- What do you like to do for fun?

How peer support specialists can help

- **Build connection.** Ask how the older adult is feeling and truly listen. Practice active listening skills and aim to be respectful and nonjudgmental.
- **Help the older adult locate a local senior center or wellness center.** Be supportive by accompanying them the first few times, if needed. The NCOA can help you find a local senior center: [NCOA Map of Partners and Programs](#)
- **Go online.** Connection can happen remotely. Help the older adult find a Facebook or Meetup group on their favorite hobby, game, cooking style, etc.
- **Pets can be a great remedy for loneliness.** Help the individual care for their pet. Offer to walk a neighbor’s dog or provide rides to the veterinarian. Some organizations bring vet services to the home and help folks foster pets.
- **Brainstorm ways to engage in social activities:**
 - Group exercise classes
 - Faith-based communities and group activities
 - Park district activities and clubs for older adults
 - Local library programming and book discussion clubs
 - Education: Night school classes at the local high school or community college. Many public colleges offer free tuition for older students.
 - Volunteer opportunities
- **More formal supports can include 12-Step programs.** Seniors in Sobriety is an Alcoholics Anonymous group for older adults. Al-Anon is also available.
- **Connect older adults to local resources.** Explore resources you can share with your clients on the E4 Center website: <https://e4center.org/resources/community-resources/>