



# LONELINESS

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## INSTITUTE ON AGING'S CENTER FOR ELDERLY SUICIDE PREVENTION Friendship Line for the Elderly

CESP's Primary Service is the 24-hour Friendship Line for the Elderly – an Accredited hotline/warmline for people 60+ who are depressed, isolated, lonely, bereaved, substance abusers and/or suicidal

- **(800) 971-0016 or (415) 752-3778**
- Traumatic Loss Services
- Contact: Charis Stiles, MSW, Friendship Line Manager, [cstiles@ioaging.org](mailto:cstiles@ioaging.org) – 415.750.4138
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- For More Information IOA Connect – 415.750.4111

# US Population Living Alone

- The number of people living alone in 2010 was approximately 29 million – a 30% increase since 1980 (US Census Bureau, 1996)
- Some researchers found that elderly individuals who live alone are lonelier than age-matched individuals living with others despite comparable social interaction frequency and personal network adequacy

# SF Population Stats 2012 – Assessment of the Needs of SF Seniors – DAAS Pt I

- SF population in year 2010 = 805,235
- SF population 65+ 2010 = 152,994 or 19% of the population
- 31% of those 65+ lived alone –  
Approximately 12,000 males and 22,000 females

# Loneliness

- Loneliness affects millions of Americans either acutely or chronically
- Human beings are hardwired to connect with others
- Our need to belong is powerful and fundamental
- Everyday loneliness is painful when people are isolated from family members and/or friends
- Loneliness can evolve into depression

# Loneliness

- Loneliness is one of the great dreads of our time
- Most of us fear loneliness
- Occurs when a person has fewer interpersonal relationships than desired...Or when the relationships are not as satisfying as desired

# Loneliness

Theorist Harry Stack Sullivan wrote:

Loneliness is the worst emotional experience imaginable – He stated that the deepest emotional problems for people are **loneliness, isolation and low self-esteem**

# Loneliness

- Loneliness is a feeling of longing and emptiness that is caused by the lack of emotional attachment and/or social ties



# Loneliness

- Loneliness is different than being alone
- Some people prefer solitude
- Loneliness is a highly subjective and personal feeling
- Loneliness makes a person vulnerable to different situations – depression, use of drugs, higher blood pressure

# Loneliness

According to Weiss (1973) loneliness can be described as a gnawing chronic disease without redeeming features – has been recognized as a strong correlate of depressive symptoms

# Living Together Loneliness

- Can result when there is a difference between expected and achieved contact
- More than ¼ of married people, the majority of them female, suffer from “living together loneliness”
- Germaine Greer wrote *“Loneliness is never more cruel than when it is felt in close propinquity with someone who has ceased to communicate”*

# Loneliness

- Hawkley, et al (1999) proposed that there are three dimensions to loneliness: **Isolation, connectedness, and belongingness**
- Loneliness has been linked to physical illness, alcoholism and suicide
- Lonely individuals have been found to express pessimistic views, be low in positive affect and are more likely to be shy and less satisfied with life

# Loneliness

- Is one of the great dreads of our time
- Most of us have experienced it and most of us fear it
- During times when you are experiencing yourself as fragmented or incomplete, or “invisible” to those around you, and when that feeling is accompanied by self-doubt, then you are likely to experience being alone – not as solitude – but as loneliness

# Loneliness

- Has been called an important public health issue – it has significant impact on the quality of life of older adults
- Some authors refer to loneliness as an epidemic
- A key element in loneliness is that it incorporates the entire self
- Loneliness is a time of excruciating awareness of one's self and how one is situated in the world

# Isolation

According to Ebersole & Hess –

- Is a response to conditions that inhibit ability or opportunity to interact with others or is a result of the desire not to interact
- Isolation increases vulnerability to disease, suicide and death
- Isolation can occur as a result of age, race/culture, frailty, poverty, appearance, sexual orientation or stereotypical thinking

# Social Isolation

- Social isolation has many causes and numerous defining characteristics – **absence of supportive significant others; lacking purpose or challenges; aloneness imposed by others; withdrawal because of hearing deficits; feelings of rejection; limited mobility; vision impairment**
- Older adults are particularly susceptible because of environmental structures, loss of family or friends, and inability to perform certain activities



# Stereotypes of Aging

According to Cheng (2005):

- Be aware of ageism and gender stereotypes especially related to women who **choose** to live alone
- Not all older women who live alone report feeling isolated

# Emotional Isolation

- Involves needs for affiliation, degree of independence, and self-concept issues
- A person made to feel lonely through ostracism, social exclusion or bereavement feels threatened, anxious, and dysphoric – emotional states that promote attempts to reconnect for relief from their negative affect

# Depression & Isolation

- When emotions go unexpressed, we can become depressed, irritable, and emotionally unavailable
- Some days depression and loneliness can trigger withdrawals – isolating versus reaching out
- Taking time for ourselves (solitude) is very different from isolation

# Depression & Isolation

- We may build walls around ourselves w/o knowing it
- We fear being judged by others (why isn't he/she over it?) can keep us from opening up
- Withdrawing heightens the sense of isolation

# Depression & Isolation

- Depression & isolation are part of the experience of grief
- In the midst of isolation and depression we may start to wonder “Why me?”
- By reaching out to others, we get the extra support that can help us through a trying time

# Evidence Based Data on Loneliness

According to Cacioppo (2006):

- The most frequently used measure of loneliness is the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale – a 20-item questionnaire measuring general feelings of social isolation and dissatisfaction with one's social interactions
- Found that loneliness and depression both had substantial predictive value

# Cacioppo's Findings Continued

- Both loneliness and depressive symptoms are relatively stable features over a 3-year period
- These data suggest that loneliness and depressive symptoms have strong reciprocal influences in middle-aged and older adults
- It is important to recognize the specific and reciprocal influences of loneliness & depressive symptoms if we are to mitigate their impact on older adults' well-being

# Loneliness and Depression

- Research has suggested that loneliness can lead to depression which can cause physical and psychological problems including death by suicide
- Anne LaMott in “Stitches” writes: “Daily rituals, especially walks, even forced marches around the neighborhood, and schedules, whether work or meals with non-awful people, can be the knots you hold on to when you’ve run out of rope”



# Recognition of Loneliness

- Can be hidden or may be disguised as a physical symptom, such as discomfort, fatigue, anxiety, tension, withdrawal
- People may appear restless, uneasy or uncomfortable
- Lonely people may choose to stay at home, go back to bed, or go to sleep

# Loneliness Interventions

- Ask about loneliness
- Spend time with the person in silence or in conversation
- Assist the person in keeping contact with people important to them
- Explore the nature of loneliness with the person
- Develop community support for the person

# How Do We Recognize Loneliness?

- Does the person initiate contact?
- Is the person anxious, withdrawn, apathetic, or hostile? Does the person provoke to get attention?
- Does the person cling to others or attempt to detain them?
- Is the person eager for visitors and distressed when they leave?
- Does the person exhibit contempt for his or her condition for self?

## What We Can Do

- Connect with people -- Telephone contact
- Connections are paramount to caring for people who are lonely – assist them with keeping contact with people who are important to them
- Be as present as possible with people who are lonely
- Empathize with people's losses and suffering

# What We Can Do Continued

Based on the research of Cacioppo:

EASE your way to social connection:

1. Extend yourself to others
2. Action plan
3. Selection – the solution to loneliness is not quantity but quality of relationships
4. Expect the best – we have more control over our thoughts than what we think

# A Poem by Inge Meldgaard

## Forgotten

Once upon a time in September,  
When Springtime's tender blooms burst forth,  
The joyous poet did write  
A tale to remember,  
Of brilliant colours,  
Softest perfumes,  
Birds in flight,  
Wondrous  
Light.



## Poem Continued

When morning came, the poet awoke  
To feel the prison chains of truth,  
To find that he'd been dreaming  
Of former days, of youth.  
Health and strength now gone,  
The old man weeps.  
No one sees  
His tears  
Fall.



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