

Seniors Speak Out About... Loneliness

Seniors Speak Out About ... is a series of to help people to better understand important matters in many seniors' lives.

It reflects the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of seniors from across Canada who came together in focus groups in 2002 and 2003 to talk about their lives and experiences.

“Being Alone and Being Lonely Are Not the Same”

Some people enjoy being alone; being "a loner" or a "lone wolf" has been part of their nature or personality throughout their lives.

Other people get their first chance to be alone as they head into later life, and they like it. Women who have been responsible for other people most of their lives may find that being alone in later life gives them a chance to grow and develop their own sense of themselves.

For many people being alone does not mean feeling lonely in later life. They may connect with others from time to time, have meaningful activities in their lives, have a pet as a companion, or have a spiritual relationship that is important to them.

At the same time, a person can be surrounded by people and feel very lonely.

What is the Difference Between Being Alone and Loneliness?

Being alone means just that, being on your own. Loneliness usually refers to being unhappy with the emotional and social relationships that you do not have, or with the ones that you do have. Loneliness is partly about numbers of friends or people in a person's life, but it is also about whether or not you feel connected to people.

Older men and older women may feel very lonely after the death of a spouse, especially if that spouse has been friend, lover, companion, and confidante all rolled into one. Some older

men say that they are expected to "Buck up" and stop grieving", because people, including family may have the mistaken attitude "it isn't manly".



Grieving is a normal human reaction to losing someone you care about.

People may feel lonely for somewhat different reasons, depending on whether they live in their home, if they live in an apartment or other residence with lots of other people around, or if they live miles from other people. A person can feel very happy with his or her relationships or feel lonely in any setting.

What Leads to Loneliness in Later Life?

Did you know that younger adults are more likely than older adults to say they feel lonely? However older adults, like people of any age, say when loneliness is there, the feeling can be intense.

Growing older can mean dealing with many changes, including changes in health, lifestyle, roles, and support. It can mean moving away from a community and dealing with the death of spouse or friends. It can mean having fewer opportunities to develop new friendships with people, or not wanting to take the “gamble” of losing another friend.

Physical pain and loss of mobility can make it harder for some older adults to get out and enjoy activities and other people. For many women, when their spouse or partner dies, they may have much less income and fewer opportunities to get out. Not being able to drive, living in rural or remote area away from others, moving to a new town, and even the season can affect whether a person feels lonely.

Being completely on your own caring for someone can also be lonely. Feeling different, feeling depressed, or not speaking the same language can make connecting with others more difficult as people grow older.

There are other reasons for loneliness. Our society does not always make seniors feel good about themselves. As Emma poignantly notes "I'd like to see a message that 'It's ok to be a senior'... an attitudinal change. I'd love to see an ad on the side of a bus 'We love our seniors'."

What Happens When People Are Very Lonely?

Being lonely is hard on a person's health. Did you know that a lonely person is more likely to develop colds and infections? That is because loneliness puts the person's immune system under stress and it becomes impaired.

Loneliness can be stressful. People try to reduce that stress in many different ways. Some rely on alcohol or medications to reduce the feelings of fear or anxiety. This in turn, leaves them feeling even more isolated. They say that if friends find out about the alcohol or medication problem, they stay away.

Some seniors become so desperate from loneliness, they consider committing suicide. Others feel the need to reach to just anybody, which can sometimes lead to problems down the road if they choose someone who is not good for them.



Test Yourself

Where do you fit on the loneliness scale?

Ask yourself:

1. Do I have someone in my life who understands me? **Yes No**
2. Do I have someone I can easily talk to? **Yes No**
3. Have I felt close to someone for a long time? **Yes No**
4. Do I have a network of friends? **Yes No**
5. Do I like my life the way it is? **Yes No**

If you answered "No" to one or more of these questions, loneliness may be affecting your life.

Personal Strategies for Preventing and Reducing Loneliness

Have you always been a loner or shy? Have you forgotten how to "do small talk"?

If so, other people probably may not know how hard it is for you to be part of social activities that others take for granted, or realize how much energy it takes.

Or do you have a more open type of personality? You can put it to good use. You can make a big difference in someone else's life.

Here's what some seniors suggest. The suggestions are useful for people of all ages and any type of personality:

Start with the small things. The quickest way to make a friend is with a smile. When you smile, people think you are friendly and easy to talk to. As 75 year old Radia notes, "It doesn't cost five dollars to smile."

Say Hi. Yvette suggests: "Just going out of your way in the apartment building to say 'Hello', especially if you say the person's name."

Take a second to say "Good morning, good afternoon, or good night" to someone as you get off the elevator or go to a store.

Reach out to others. Recognize the other person may feel even more awkward than you do. You can help overcome those feelings by taking the initiative to talk to a neighbor, a relative, or a friend. Invite them for a short walk, it may do you both good.

Encourage your friend or neighbour, but don't push. Know someone who cannot or "will not" make friends with others? Sometimes it just takes patience. It is often hard for people who aren't lonely or aren't anxious when being with people to understand how things feel to someone who is. Other people may not realize how much energy it takes them to try.

Be a friend. People who show an interest in others and who are kind and friendly make good friends. Remember, everyone wants to be around people who like to do similar things and people who are nice to them.

Take a chance. Developing new relationships can make life worthwhile, at any age.

Help someone else. People often feel better when they can help someone else.

Look your best. How's your appearance? Women and men say they appreciate being around a person who bathes regularly and wears clean clothes. If a person smells bad, others won't want to come too close, and they won't get a chance to know the person better.

Avoid judging and shun certain people. Depression, alcohol or medication use problems are more common among seniors than many people realize. The problems develop for many reasons. Often, this is a good person, who is also very lonely.

Make use of what is available. (Esther's Story) Esther takes the shuttle bus to the grocery store whether or not she needs the groceries. For her, this is a chance to get out, talk and be with others.

Jean-Pierre enjoys being a regular caller to a local radio show. It exercises his brain to keep up with the local events and he feels more connected to his community.

Keep connected. Do you have a friend whose spouse has died? Continue to invite them to activities and events that they were involved with before their spouse's death. Although they may turn you down because they don't quite feel up to it right now, the friend will know you still care and are interested in him or her as a person, and not as one half of a couple.

Take the Extra Step (Ella's Story). When Ella invited Honoré, her neighbour to a seniors' dinner, Honoré was very hesitant. ("I won't know anyone there"). Ella offered to sit with her at the table, an important little extra step helped

Honoré get over her initial shyness.

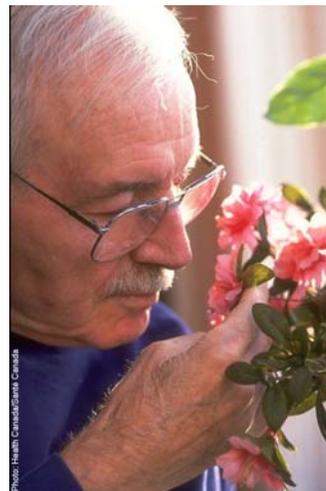
Loneliness and Depression

If you are feeling very sad or anxious for weeks on end, or if you aren't sleeping and eating well, or if you are avoiding people, you may be depressed.

Don't go it alone. Seek help. Talking with a counsellor can help. Some communities have peer counsellors. A peer counsellor is a person close to your age who understands what you are going through.

Support groups for dealing with grief or other challenges can help too. An anti-depressant medication may also help, but realize that it can take several weeks for the medication to become effective.

Many of these medications don't mix very well with alcohol, so you may want to hold off "having a nightcap" or drink with your dinner until after you are feeling much better and no longer need the anti-depressant.



Community Strategies to Help Older Adults Feel Welcome

Are you a community service provider working with seniors? You have an important role in preventing and reducing loneliness too.

1. Routinely assess your community. How senior friendly is your community? Your neighbourhood? Your services? Your senior centre? Many places can often feel intimidating to seniors, without even knowing it.

For example, seniors in one community explained that their centre felt “cliquish”, and they did not feel comfortable going there. They offered several suggestions to help avoid that from occurring:

- Recognize that a 55 year old and 75 year old may have different interests.
- Keep the costs of joining and activities low (so people in different financial circumstances can participate).
- Make sure the person answering your phone is friendly, polite and easy to understand when people call your centre for information.
- Have a pleasant person available to meet and greet any new people and to welcome people back when they’ve been away for a while.
 - Introduce a new person around.
 - Have fairness and sharing guidelines to politely remind people that their centre is for everyone.
 - Make sure all your staff says “hi” to newcomers and regulars, of any age.

2. Look at developing community resources such as telephone visiting and friendship programs. Meeting and talking with people is a skill that some people lose because they have not had the opportunities. Friendships programs are fun events to help people regain their confidence.

Regular telephone contact can increase feelings of security, and show that people care. It can give a senior someone to connect to, or unburden to about what they are going through. It provides a person-to-person link where the senior might not feel physically, emotionally, socially, or financially up to having visitors. However, don’t assume that just because someone is alone that they are lonely.

Resources

More Tips on Preventing and Overcoming Loneliness. See CARP (Canadian Association of Retired Persons).

Website: www.50Plus.com

Type "loneliness" in the search tool on their site.

For Developing Communities that Are Senior Friendly:

Alberta Council on Aging has produced a Seniors Friendly Toolkit. Contact them by Phone: (780) 423-7781 • Fax: (780) 425-9246
• Email: acaging@interbaun.com
• Mail: #104, 10010 - 107A Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T5H 4H8
Website: www.seniorfriendly.ca/

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