

Loneliness and Social Isolation

Created for Thoughtful Engagement

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The pandemic has provided many of us with the opportunity to understand loneliness and social isolation on a personal level, and an undetermined length of time. This perhaps, for the first time in our lives. When speaking with friends and family, I notice we echo each other’s sentiments by acknowledging how wonderful it would be to hug our loved ones, to touch another person, and to have the ability to freely socialize once again. We have been experiencing firsthand what many of our seniors, especially those who have cognitive impairment, have experienced on a daily basis. Loneliness and social isolation have the ability to affect the mental health and well-being of all age groups, especially those seniors who live alone or have cognitive impairment.

Researchers have been inspired to understand the dynamics of loneliness and the risk factors our elders face, for many reasons; we have an aging population where people are living longer, and of course, the pandemic necessitating isolation (Aleman & Sommer, 2020; Cacioppo, Grippo, London, Goossens, & Cacioppo, 2015; National Institute on Aging, 2019). We human beings have always sought connection with our fellow humans. We are social creatures, even the most ardent introvert needs human connection at times. The ability to make this human connection is under new scrutiny, as researchers are working to better understand how those who may not be living alone, but those who have cognitive impairment and live in a facility (either assisted living or a dementia unit) perceive loneliness and social isolation (Aleman & Sommer). The pandemic has created an alienation not seen before in facilities, due to many risk factors. We see this playing out daily as the nightly news has spotlighted the plight of those living in facilities.

We’ll take a look at the risk factors of the perception of loneliness and social isolation that our seniors face, but first we must define loneliness by breaking it down into its parts. Loneliness is regarded as a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one’s social needs are not being met by the quality of one’s social relationships (Aleman & Sommer, 2020). In essence, it is the quality of life that is affected. The American Society on Aging defines quality of life as “… personal feelings, details, outlook, and day-to-day experiences—how happy and positive one feels, how comfortable and secure, how productive and desired, how healthy and free an individual considers themselves…” (McGaha, n.d.). In my experience as an Elder Life Specialist, one reoccurring theme mentioned by all my geriatric patients is that they (the older adult) want to feel useful, needed, and/or productive. Quality of life reflects these desires. Assessing for quality of life is crucial in providing the appropriate programming for activities. When the program matches the need, then quality of life can increase.

Quality of life has the potential to affect all domains of our loved one’s life: physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, nutritional, social, financial, and environmental. Social isolation and loneliness can and do disrupt some or all of these domains negatively. Your loved one may stop enjoying meals, they may begin or increase cognitive decline, emotionally your loved one may begin or increase disturbing behaviors (crying, yelling out, wandering, etc.), they may stop participating in activities that in the past they once enjoyed and they may begin to feel scared or unsafe in an environment they have safely lived in. Conversely, those who engage in meaningful, productive activities tend to live longer, have a sense of well-being, and a sense of purpose. An increase in the quality of life has shown to improve our elder’s cognition and can diminish disturbing behaviors. (National Institute on Aging, 2019).

Thoughtful Engagement provides our elders with the opportunity to increase their quality of life while decreasing risk factors that lead to cognitive decline and mortality. The next several blogs will speak to the specific programing for the assessed need and the activities that are specifically designed for your loved one.

References

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