

FOREVER ACTIVE

PERSONALIZED FITNESS AND WELLNESS FOR MEN 50 +



Loneliness, Social Isolation and the Older Adult

Introduction

The Canadian Mental Health Associations (CMHA's) Mental Health Week is May 7 –13. This is an annual national event that takes place during early May to encourage people from all walks of life to learn, talk, reflect and engage with others on all issues relating to mental health.

One in four Canadian seniors has a mental health issue and these can significantly affect the quality of life of the older adult. Mental health issues can take the form of anxiety and panic disorders, eating disorders, personality disorders such as anti-social, obsessive-compulsive and paranoia behaviours, post traumatic stress syndrome, depression, dementia and Alzheimer's.

Chronic pain, loss of functional ability due to arthritis or osteoporosis, hearing loss or visual impairment, bladder incontinence and loss of a loved one are just some of the causes for deterioration of mental health status in the older adult. Physical activity, a good diet and a positive mental attitude have been shown to help prevent many mental health issues and slow down the progression in others.

This newsletter will focus on loneliness and social isolation which are common risk factors for deteriorating mental health in the older adult. Loneliness and social isolation rob the older adult of a high quality of life by contributing to depression and physical disabilities because they can lead to lower self image, self worth and self esteem. Loneliness can spiral to social isolation in the older adult and this robs our communities and society of valuable experience and worth that only the older adult can deliver through volunteering and mentoring.

Feeling alone is difficult for everyone but even more so for those that have declining physical and cognitive abilities which is common in the older adult. Loneliness and social isolation are important topics for the older adult and need to be examined more closely.



Did you Know

Past Newsletters that Have Dealt with Mental Health Issues

Go to Forever-active.com to download the following newsletters

May 2012 - Dementia

April 2013 - Stress

June 2013 - Mindfulness

March 2014 - Sleep and Insomnia

June 2014 - The Mind Issue - Exercise and Mindfulness

March 2015 - Developing a Positive Attitude for Positive Change

April 2016 - Cognitive Engagement and a Positive Lifestyle for Active Living

July 2016 - Joyful and Productive Journey

April 2017 - Mental Health and the Older Adult

The Loneliness Epidemic

Research indicates that we are, as a society, more lonely than we have ever been and no age group feels the sting of loneliness more than the older adult generation.

Recent research findings:

1. 18 % of older adults live alone and 43% report feeling lonely on a regular basis.
2. People 60 years and older who reported feeling lonely saw a 45 % increase in their risk for death and a 59% greater risk of mental and physical decline than their more social counterparts.
3. Loneliness breeds social isolation. Older adults who feel lonely are more prone to behave in ways that may cause other people not to want to be around them which leads to social isolation.
4. Two-thirds of older adults who said they were lonely were either married or living with a partner. This leads credence to the belief that it is not about how many relationships you have but how meaningful they are .



Ways You can Alleviate Loneliness:

1. Engage in meaningful conversation.

- Don't wait to be listened to and be observed. Be an active listener and observer.

Active Listener:

1. Pay attention– don't let idle thoughts enter your mind. Focus on who you are talking to and what is being said.
2. Don't judge - have an open mind and be open to different opinions.
3. Paraphrase key points - don't assume you understand. Rephrase what you have heard. It reinforces to the other person that you are listening.
4. Introduce your ideas, suggestions and feelings in a respectful manner. - Do not take a "you're right they're wrong" stance. Talk about similar experiences and feelings.

2. Develop strategies to avoid isolation (personalized loneliness eradication plan).



1. Journal daily and try to identify why you are feeling lonely.
1. Identify activities you enjoy most and that will help eradicate these feelings of loneliness.

2. Identify ways that you can include others (trusted family, friends, peers) when you do these activities.



3. Schedule daily chores, errands or exercise when you are most likely to meet and interact with others.

4. Schedule daily / weekly phone calls, lunches, walks with friends, past associates etc. Identify ways to stay in touch with those who have been closest to you in the past.



5. Learn to use social media, facebook, twitter, instagram, email. It is fun and easy.

3. Set short and long term goals for yourself.

- Make them SMART This will give you things to focus on and by accomplishing them will help elevate your self esteem.



4. Consider getting a pet.

- Cats and dogs are generally considered the best pets for fighting loneliness, as they are happy to interact with you and most enjoy physical contact. Pets provide company and a good distraction from any negative feelings that may be bogging you down.



5. Avoid addictive coping behaviors.

It's not uncommon for someone who feels lonely to end up coping with a possibly addictive behavior - whether it be alcohol, drugs, shopping, food, or something else. Make healthy life decisions when you're feeling lonely, rather than using quick fixes that make things worse down the line.



6. Volunteer

Most older adults underestimate the experience, skills and expertise they have. Our communities are in desperate need of them. Volunteering is a great opportunity to "give back" and by doing so you feel good about yourself and it enhances your self worth. Focus more on "giving" rather than "receiving" to fight social isolation and loneliness.



Summary

Loneliness and Social Isolation

Loneliness is an inevitable condition of existence so emotionally it is important to recognize that the feeling of loneliness is not something which can be entirely solved, or avoided. It is a subjective expression of dissatisfaction with the level of social contact one person has. It is important to identify why you are feeling lonely. Once identified, there are many strategies a person can utilize to help minimize the feelings of loneliness.

Social Isolation is an objective measure of lack of social belongingness. There is a lack of social engagement and therefore a deficiency in fulfilling quality relationships. It can develop from a pre-existing mental health issue such as anxiety or depression or evolve over time into a mental health issue.

In some cases social isolation can be referred to as solitude and can be a personal choice. For example someone who is an introvert vs an extrovert. However, there are many social issues such as a loss of spouse or family members living a long distance away, being a visible minority or immigrant, and physical barriers such as lack of public transport, poor housing and mental health issues that leave the older adult vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation.

It is also important to recognize that social isolation is not always the sole cause of loneliness. An individual may feel lonely despite having many interactions with their different social networks.

The social and economic consequences of loneliness and social isolation are significant. Lonely individuals have a 45% higher rate of suicide and 30% higher hospitalization rate than their non-lonely counterparts.

It is important to be sensitive to those most vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation. Giving a vulnerable older adult such as those who have just lost a spouse, suffer from a chronic disability or are living in a remote/isolated/rural area with no public transport, a little attention can go a long way in helping them adjust and continue to be valuable and contributing members of our society for years to come.