

LONELINESS AND THE EFFECT ON MENTAL HEALTH



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HEALTH

"But there are other words for privacy and independence. They are isolation and loneliness."

— Megan Whalen Turner, *The King of Attolia*

The most recent U.S. census data shows that more than a quarter of the population lives alone – the highest rate ever recorded. Being alone does not necessarily herald loneliness, and living with someone may not stave it off. However, being alone can lend itself to undiagnosed loneliness and its partner, depression.



Especially right now, people are spending more time isolated from others than ever before. Many of us, however, live with family members and perhaps communicate with colleagues via video, text, and email. This is not necessarily the case for our seniors.

It is important to note that your loved one can be lonely even when they have people coming and going in their life each day. And with short-term memory issues, their perception of how often they see you or other loved ones can be altered so that they are lonely even moments after you've left.

Setting your senior up with technology for video chatting, while not a replacement for a live person, can help in those moments where they just need a friendly face.



Your loved one may feel a daily caregiver is only there for chores and not for companionship. See if your caregiver can schedule in time just to sit and chat to help them feel heard and cared for. And if you aren't sure this is a valuable use of their paid time, these casual conversations could yield medical information that you might not know about otherwise.

Your senior also can feel lonely because they do not feel like they are a productive member of society. Connecting them, even virtually, with your local senior center or religious organization can help them find a niche.

As we move back to a time of less isolation, ensure that your senior can get to small gatherings. Often a lack of transportation and their desire not to burden you will add to their feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Source: [National Institute of Health](#) and [American Psychiatric Association](#)



Signs of Loneliness

Some of the signs to watch for, both in yourself and in your loved ones, include:

- Inability to connect except on a very superficial level
- No close or "best" friends
- A feeling of isolation, even when in a group
- Exhaustion in social situations
- A continual feeling of being drained or unmotivated

Source: [CIGNA Health Care](#)

Types of Loneliness

There are essentially three types of loneliness. Understanding which one is affecting your loved one will go a long way towards knowing how to help.

Social Loneliness

As our seniors age, they naturally drift apart from social circles they once had. Perhaps they've been moved to be closer to you, leaving behind friends and activities. This is a type of loneliness that occurs when you don't feel a sense of belonging to a group. Even if your parents are still together, there is a need for a wider social circle. Research senior activities in your area, even virtual calls, that might connect them with people outside of their home.



Emotional Loneliness

Emotional loneliness can hit those who have lost a partner and feel like they don't fit into their social circle where others still have their spouses or live-in children. It is a feeling of lack of relationship or attachment. Often it can be felt the worst when your senior wants someone to talk to each day. It can be helpful to reconnect them with same-generation relatives that they might have lost touch with. Even emails and text exchanges can go a long way towards restoring their sense of self.



Existential Loneliness

This is the most intangible of the types. It is generally more of a feeling of not knowing your place in the universe that most of us experience at one time or another. It typically shows its head in times of change when we don't know what to expect or don't realize that others are sharing the same life experience. Encourage your loved one to share their thoughts and feelings about aging or set them up with others in their age or medical group.



Source: [Psychology Today](#)



Chronic Loneliness Risks

Chronic loneliness can lead to:

- Depression
- Sleep disorders
- Type 2 diabetes
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Mental health and emotional problems
- Substance abuse

Social isolation increases the risk of early death by **50–84%**! The stress of loneliness affects immune system functioning and increases inflammation, precursors to countless more complex medical issues.

Source: [National Institute of Health](#)