HELP OLDER ADULTS PREVENT SOCIAL ISOLATION DIY GUIDE

The Challenge

A significant population of older adults experience social isolation. More than one-third (34%) of adults ages 50 to 80 said they feel isolated from others at least some of the time, according to the 2023 National Poll on Healthy Aging from the University of Michigan. A similar percentage (37%) also reported feeling a lack of companionship and (33%) reported infrequent contact with people outside of their home. According to the National Institute on Aging, such isolation, along with feelings of loneliness, has been linked to a decline in cognitive function and to a range of physical and mental conditions including high blood pressure, heart disease, weakened immune system, anxiety, depression and Alzheimer’s disease.

There are a number of reasons why older adults are at risk of social isolation and loneliness, according to the Centers for Disease Control. For example, they may be more likely to live alone, be retired from their jobs, and have lost family members or friends, limiting the amount of daily social contact they have. They may also suffer from chronic illness, hearing, or vision loss, which can make social interaction or even simple telephone calls difficult.

Fortunately, increased awareness of the risks of social isolation as well as renewed focus on creative ways to reduce or prevent it have led to a range of practical and effective ways to help older adults feel less alone. Whether you’re interested in making in-person visits, spending some time on the phone or computer, or helping others through apps and programs, there are a number of ways to help older adults feel less isolated and more engaged with the world—and you just might benefit, too.

Time Commitment

The time commitment required to connect with older adults ranges from a few minutes to regular, ongoing assistance with programs. Volunteers can give as much time as they wish and often plan their outreach around their other commitments.

Who Can Do This?

This volunteer activity can be done by anyone who can visit others, make a telephone or video call, or write a letter.

Great Reasons to Help Fight Social Isolation

Loneliness and isolation can have a significantly negative impact on people’s lives and health. By offering a lifeline of connection, you can help change those circumstances, improve someone’s well-being—and even make a new friend or two.

How You Can Help
Fortunately, increased awareness of the risks of social isolation as well as renewed focus on creative ways to reduce or prevent it have led to a range of practical and effective ways to help older adults feel less alone. Whether you’re interested in making in-person visits, spending some time on the phone or computer, or helping others through apps and programs, there are a number of ways to help older adults feel less isolated and more engaged with the world—\textbf{and you just might benefit, too.}

Here are several ways you can get involved and help identify and reduce social isolation among older adults.

**Step 1: Find the need**

The first step to making a difference among socially isolated adults is to find the need. You may have relatives or friends who are older and experiencing social isolation. You may also find people who need a friendly face or ear in your community, including at senior centers, assisted living facilities, or Veteran’s Administration hospitals. Think about the older adults in your network and community and where you’d like to focus your time and efforts.

**Step 2: Assess the risk**

Not everyone who lives alone is socially isolated or feels loneliness, but they may be at greater risk for these issues. Fortunately, there are a number of tools that you can encourage loved ones to use if you are concerned that they are lonely or socially isolated.

The \textit{AARP Foundation’s Connect2Affect} aims to end social isolation and help older adults build social connections. This hub includes a collection of tools and resources to help older adults stay connected. If you’re worried that a friend or family member may be lonely or socially isolated, \textit{this self-assessment tool} can help them identify their risk and find ways for them to become more connected.

Other ways to identify opportunities to help older adults at risk for social isolation and loneliness include contacting administrators at health care and residential facilities to find out about volunteer opportunities.

**Step 3: Seek out opportunities**

If you’re able to make visits or run errands, there are a number of ways you can help older adults beat social isolation. Assisting with tasks and errands such as household chores, grocery shopping, or transportation to appointments can be a way to offer both help and companionship. A simple visit or helping hand can mean so much and deliver benefits that last long after the visit is over.
Another opportunity to help foster connection is to help plan group outings or events. You could organize a game night at your local senior center or assisted living facility. Are you an artist, historian, or tech whiz? Why not use your own talents or knowledge to create or facilitate workshops or classes of interest to older adults? You can also share hobbies or interests by leading an art class or leading a book club discussion.

Some nonprofits specialize in helping older adults. Chapters of the National Exchange Club sponsor programs like Adopt-a-Grandparent, which pairs local young people with older adults in care facilities. They build lasting relationships through monthly visits, learning from each other and providing companionship for adults who may be socially isolated.

**Step 4: Go virtual**

Technology can be a useful tool in helping others connect, especially if in-person visits are difficult or the person is immune-compromised and needs to guard against illness. Additionally, some older adults may need a little help mastering the tech that can keep them connected. If you’re comfortable with technology, offer to teach older adults in your life how to use videoconferencing, social media, email, or other tools that can help them keep in touch with their loved ones. If they are open to teaching themselves, suggest they check out SeniorNet, which helps bridge the knowledge gap between older adults and technology.

Of course, as you help your contact build an online presence and connect digitally, be sure to make them aware of how to prevent digital scams. The Federal Trade Commission publishes the “Pass It On” campaign, which includes information about how older consumers can prevent scams and nuisances ranging from identity theft to unwanted email and text messages. This information is free to download and share. AARP’s Fraud Watch Network also has a wealth of information.

The telephone is another way to connect virtually and lift someone’s spirits. If your loved one or a lonely older adult needs more phone connection, let them know about AARP’s Friendly Voice, which places calls to U.S. adults in English or Spanish. Requests for calls can be made by calling toll-free 888-281-0145 (English) or 888-497-4108 (Spanish).

If you’d like to volunteer to connect with others via phone or video chat, check out Front Porch’s Social Call program or Dorot’s social connection program.

Finally, if you’re looking for something more active to get your daily dose of exercise in, the Silver Sneakers program offers gentle online exercise classes.

**Step 5: Write it out**

Writing can be therapeutic, and research has shown that jotting down your thoughts and feelings can relieve stress and help you solve problems more effectively. Encourage a lonely friend to take up journaling or share his or her thoughts with a pen pal. Most people love to get
personal letters or cards in the mail. It’s nice to know someone went to the trouble of writing
and mailing something from the heart. If you’d like to strike up some correspondence with an
isolated older adult, look no further than Letters Against Isolation, which can match you with a
pen pal. Love for Our Elders is another correspondence program that matches volunteers with
older adults.

Do you have a creative streak? Use your talent to make a card through the Bring Smiles to
Seniors program.

Step 6: Help existing organizations

There are a number of nonprofit organizations working hard nationwide addressing loneliness
and isolation issues as well. One of the largest is Meals on Wheels, which delivers nourishing
meals and regular human contact to homebound older adults. Senior Corps is a national service
program offering volunteer opportunities specifically tailored to the needs of older adults,
including companionship and transportation services.

While not exclusively for older adults, Be My Eyes is an app that connects visually impaired
people with volunteers who can offer visual assistance and help people with their daily tasks
through live video calls. Senior Center Without Walls is a telephone-based program that
provides older adults with opportunities for social interaction, classes, and discussions.
Programs like Lifetime Arts’ Creative Aging in America’s Libraries offer a variety of art classes
for older adults, from dance and drawing to sculpture and singing.

Websites like Create the Good®, VolunteerMatch, and Idealist allow volunteers to search for
positions specifically focused on assisting older adults. Connecting with organizations like AARP
or the National Council on Aging will help you find other volunteer opportunities.

Tips for Success

As you begin looking for the best ways you can help fight social isolation and loneliness,
consider the following tips to set yourself up for success.

1. **Understand the issues.** Educate yourself about the causes and consequences of social
isolation and loneliness in older adults. Learn about the challenges they face, the impact
on their mental and physical health, and the potential solutions. This knowledge will not
only help you empathize with older adults but also prepare you to address their needs
more effectively.

2. **Consider your schedule.** Many people lead busy lives and may not be able to fulfill their
commitments if they overschedule themselves. Think about how much time you have to
devote to connecting with others and find the right option for you. Establishing regular
schedules and consistent contact is the most effective way to alleviate social isolation, so
consider whether participating in a weekly or monthly call or organizing group events
every quarter or writing letters when you may be the right fit.
3. **Understand and honor boundaries, individuality, and privacy.** Respect the privacy and personal boundaries of older adults, ensuring they feel comfortable and safe during visits or interactions. Avoid conversations about sensitive topics or information. Obtain necessary consent or permissions when engaging in activities involving personal information or sensitive topics. Also remember that older adults have diverse backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Respect their individuality and avoid generalizations based on age. Treat each person with dignity and celebrate their unique qualities. Tailor your approach to suit their preferences, ensuring a more meaningful and personal connection for everyone involved.

4. **Engage in active listening.** Compassion and active listening are vital when engaging with older adults. Show genuine interest in their stories, experiences, and emotions. By creating a safe and non-judgmental space, you allow older adults to express themselves freely, fostering meaningful connections and trust.

5. **Be patient.** Building relationships with older adults may take time, especially if they are initially hesitant or reserved. Be patient and persistent in your efforts, showing consistency and reliability. Your presence and support can make a significant difference in their lives over time.

6. **Reflect and adapt.** Take time to reflect on your volunteering experiences to identify what works well and what can be improved. Be open to feedback from the older adults and the organization with which you are volunteering. Use this feedback to adapt and refine your approach to ensure your efforts have a lasting positive impact.

Volunteering to prevent social isolation and loneliness in older adults is a powerful way to contribute to the well-being of our communities. By choosing the right organization, understanding the issues, showing empathy, and fostering meaningful connections, you can enjoy a successful and fulfilling volunteer experience while enriching the lives of older adults.

**Online resources:**

In addition to the resources, programs, and organizations mentioned throughout this guide, here are some additional sources of information and ideas.

**AARP:** The leading organization nationwide dedicated to protecting the quality of life for all as we age. AARP also has many volunteer opportunities for those interested in working with and on behalf of older adults.

**Your local Area Agency on Aging:** Seek out your local Area Agency on Aging, which can provide a wealth of resources, information, and ideas for volunteers.

**Eldercare Locator:** This government-sponsored website includes information about support services, elder rights, and many other issues in your community and nationwide.

**U.S. Aging:** This advocacy group relies on volunteers to help protect the interests of older adults.