

# **Commentary: Let's reverse isolation and loneliness for senior adults**

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An elderly man fidgets against the wrist and ankle restraints of his ICU bed, mentally “altered” and not comprehending what is happening in his delirium. No visitors. He pleads with me: “Can you stay? I wish I had someone who could sit here with me and be nice.”

Down the hall, a woman in her 80s cuddles a teddy bear as she recovers from a complication from brain surgery, cut off from her brother and sister. They are all that remains of her social support. She has been in the hospital for almost a month. “I’m running out of faith,” she says.

Working as a hospital chaplain on the gerontology team has given me another understanding of the truth God spoke in the beginning, that it is not good for people to be alone (Genesis 2:18).

I am not talking about a newly formed mud man yearning for a helper, but a whole demographic of society in desperate need of a host of champions to care for them in a unique isolation.

## **Social isolation and loneliness**

Research among people aged 65 and older in our communities shows they endure multiple variations of loss—relationships, senses, motor function, cognitive capabilities, independence, etc.—and chronic diseases such as heart failure, kidney disease, cancer, Alzheimer’s and dementia, arthritis and chronic pain, among others.

The suffering that stems from social isolation and/or loneliness often is not screened during routine clinic visits.

Social isolation often is defined as having minimal or no contact with other people in a physical sense and/or social sense, even if virtually. Loneliness is the perceived absence of meaningful or intimate relationships.

Social isolation and loneliness by no means are issues exclusive to older members of society. We all can empathize with the sting of feeling alone, even when in a crowd. The statistics regarding these issues in the geriatric population, however, are considerable.

## Statistics and effects

Some studies have found as much as [15-20 percent of older adults](#) experience social or emotional isolation from others for an extended period of time. Included within this statistic are those who live in skilled or assisted living facilities and retirement communities.

A study within a senior living facility found [60 percent](#) of the residents felt like they lacked companionship some or most of the time.

Troubling correlations exist between social isolation and loneliness and a person's well-being. A study in 2018 found "individuals who are socially isolated have been found to be at [greater risk of developing](#) cardiovascular disease, stroke, depression, dementia and premature death." One poignant finding: loneliness is a predictor of suicide in people aged 65 and older.

Cultural factors concerning social isolation and loneliness are more complex. Many may not be willing to admit they feel lonely because of a negative stigma attached to loneliness or being perceived as "weak." In addition, American and Western societies tend to fear or shun old age, adding to isolation and loneliness among older individuals.

# COVID-19 as a reminder

Now, countless people are learning how prolonged separation from community affects their physical, emotional and spiritual health. In a time of social and physical distancing, creativity is a necessity in maintaining meaningful relationships.

Hospitals, nursing homes and other facilities designed to care for the sick and elderly are prohibiting visitors for their protection. For more than six months, my own family has tried to make do seeing my grandmother from outside her window. At multiple points during the pandemic, her situation, like many others, has been like living in solitary confinement.

Another way of looking at this situation is to see it as a reminder of what already has been there for decades, staring us in the face. Social isolation and loneliness did not crop up with COVID-19.

The isolation and loneliness of old age long has been expressed in questions like: “What legacy am I leaving behind? How have I spent my precious years? Am I now nothing more than a burden to my family? What is my purpose? Has God forgotten me?”

Pondering these questions is uncomfortable. Having even more time to dwell on them while quarantined can be tortuous.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I ask you to imagine yourself in the hospital bed or nursing home during this time. How would you want your church to relieve your suffering?

## The challenge

It is time to stretch our creative muscles a little further. It will take more than a couple of people from the congregation visiting “shut-ins” every few

weeks. The challenge before us demands relentless intentionality, stemming from the love of God found in each of us, in the effort of building a culture that lives and breathes inclusiveness found in true community.

All areas are fair game for change, including how technology, music, written word, social media and other mediums are used to establish hearty individual and group relationships. By so doing, we may gain a fresh understanding of what it means to live by the Golden Rule (Luke 6:31).

Why is this important? Because the “Silver Tsunami” is happening. This is the influx of Baby Boomers reaching geriatric age. Soon, the number of geriatric people in the nation will surpass those aged 18 and younger. No matter how strong a support system any given person may have, that is a lot of lonely people.

This pandemic provides an opportunity for us to step back and evaluate our situations in different ways. We still have a chance to alter the pattern of isolation and loneliness experienced by so many of our elderly loved ones.

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