

14 Ways to Help Seniors Avoid Isolation

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Loneliness and social isolation have been clearly linked to poor health outcomes. “A Review of Social Isolation” by Nicholas R. Nicholson published in The Journal of Primary Prevention, observes how “social isolation has been demonstrated to lead to numerous detrimental health effects in older adults, including increased risk for all-cause mortality, dementia, increase risk for rehospitalization, and an increased number of falls.”

Unfortunately, isolation among seniors is alarmingly common, and will continue to increase in prevalence as the population grows. Learn how to help your loved ones stay healthy by reading more on the top ways to help seniors avoid isolation.

Ways to Help Seniors Avoid Isolation

“A Review of Social Isolation” notes that the prevalence of isolation among “community dwelling older adults” or seniors who live at home rather than senior living communities, may be as high as 43%.



“With a prevalence of over 40% and the sheer number of older persons projected to increase exponentially... social isolation will likely impact the health, well-being and quality of life of numerous older person now and in the foreseeable future.”

Considering the demonstrated risks and the increasing prevalence of this issue, it’s certainly worth addressing how we can promote social integration among our older loved ones, and even ourselves – for it has been shown that family caregivers are themselves at a high risk of social isolation.

Here are the top ways to promote connectedness and social health:

1. Make Transportation Available

Lack of adequate transportation is a primary cause of a social isolation. Because many seniors do not drive, this is a big issue for them, so anything that helps seniors get around and make independent choices about travel promotes their social health. Creating a solid public transportation infrastructure and providing special transportation options to seniors and disabled people will help promote their social integration. For example, our blog recently reported that [giving free buses to seniors promotes their health](#). Family offering rides to older loved ones and helping them to learn to use public transportation will also help them maintain social connections and a healthy sense of independence.

2. Promote Sense of Purpose

Seniors with a sense of purpose or hobbies that interest them are less likely to succumb to the negative effects of social isolation. Besides providing a sense of purpose, many hobbies and interests are inherently social in nature. Anything that involves a group, for example, playing bridge, could be said to be socially healthy. If a senior is bereft of ideas for what to do, there are always planned events at the local senior center. Volunteering is also great way of

maintaining and expressing a sense of purpose. Encouraging seniors to remain active in their hobbies and interests, and providing them opportunities to volunteer can help them maintain their sense of purpose and keep them from becoming isolated and lonely.

3. Encourage Religious Seniors to Maintain Attendance at their Places of Worship

For seniors who have been regular churchgoers, this weekly social connection has been shown to be quite beneficial. Nicholson's review observed that many studies have shown the benefits of churchgoing for seniors: "Those frequently attending religious services have been found to have lower mortality rates than those with infrequent attendance." Older church goers not only benefit from the social interaction and sense of purpose that weekly worship provides, but they also benefit from the watchful eye of other churchgoers, who are likely to recognize a decline in an isolated senior that may have gone unnoticed otherwise.

4. Give a Senior Something to Take Care Of

Many experts note that the act of nurturing can relieve feelings of social isolation. In the peer reviewed paper "[Emotional Benefits of Dog Ownership](#)," Eve Beals succinctly outlines the benefits of nurturing a pet: "Pet owners remain engaged socially, have less depression, suffer less loneliness, feel more secure, have more motivation for constructive use of time and require less medication than non-pet owners. Animal companionship facilitates establishing friends, is a social lubricant, gives a reason to get up in the morning and is an icebreaker." Obviously, you would need to make certain that the senior is capable and willing to properly care for the pet before giving a pet as a gift. Assuming the senior is capable of caring for a pet, nurturing and caring for an animal companion can be quite beneficial. Even tending a garden can satisfy our nurturing drive, so giving a senior a plant or gardening supplies as a gift can be beneficial too.

5. Encourage a Positive Body Image

Nicholson's review notes that some research has shown that many older adults avoid social interaction because of a poor body image. "Individuals with a poor body image attributable to being overweight may decrease or cease interactions with their social networks to the point where they could be at risk for social isolation. For example, individuals who are overweight may be self-conscious or embarrassed, and, therefore, less likely to engage in their social networks." Compliments and positive comments can go a long way to boosting the self-esteem of seniors. Similarly, discouraging seniors from fretting over their appearance or catastrophizing the cosmetic effects of aging may help them avoid becoming self-conscious to the point that they avoid social interactions. For seniors who are genuinely overweight, addressing the root problem by encouraging weight loss through healthy eating and exercise can be helpful too, but always be positive and sensitive in efforts to encourage older loved ones to lose weight.

6. Encourage Hearing and Vision Tests

Seniors with undiagnosed or untreated hearing problems may avoid social situations because of difficulty communicating or embarrassment. Encourage seniors to have their hearing checked and hearing problems treated. A hearing aid may be the only barrier between a senior and better social health. Vision tests are important too as sight problems "limit opportunities for social interactions with others" according Nicholson's landmark review on social isolation research.

7. Make Adaptive Technologies Available

Adaptive technologies, ranging from walkers to the above mentioned hearing aids, help seniors to compensate for age related deficits and deficiencies that can impede social interaction. Many seniors do not take full advantage of these devices. Sometimes they may be embarrassed because they don't want to appear or feel old. In other cases, the device may be overly expensive and not covered by insurance. Both as a society and in our own families we can

encourage and facilitate the use of adaptive aids that make it possible for seniors to have active and involved social lives.

8. Notify Neighbors

Because socially isolated seniors may be vulnerable to a variety of unexpected problems and may have underlying issues such as dementia, their loved ones should consider informing members of the community that there is a vulnerable adult in the neighborhood. Trusted neighbors within a block radius or so should be introduced to the senior if feasible, informed about any particular issues the senior may have, and asked to keep a friendly eye out in case anything seems amiss.

9. Encourage Dining with Others

The act of eating with others is inherently social. In “[Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective](#),” Robin Fox writes that eating is “a profoundly social urge. Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is also an occasion for distributing, giving and sharing for the expressing of altruism, whether from parents to children, children to in-laws, or anyone to visitors and strangers.” Encourage seniors to share a meal with others whenever possible, whether it’s with a church group, the local senior center, or a friendly café or diner. Dining with others is also likely to help [promote better nutrition](#), which is crucial for the elderly.

10. Address Incontinence Issues

For obvious reasons, a senior who experiences incontinence may be hesitant to leave their home and could become isolated. When family caregivers and health professionals make sure that incontinence issues are appropriately addressed, for example through medications and incontinence supplies, seniors can have a better opportunity to recognize their social potentials and live life without embarrassment and fear of going into public.

11. Give a Hug

There’s nothing like a hug from grandma. [Research](#) has shown that friendly platonic touching from friends and family, like hand holding or hugging, can lower stress and promote feelings of well-being. On the other hand, people deprived of touch can experience decreased well-being. So even if you or your older relatives are not the touchy-feely types, at the very least weave a friendly hug into your greetings and farewells.

12. Give Extra Support to Seniors Who Have Recently Lost a Spouse

Older adults may be at highest risk for becoming socially isolated during the period after a spouse has passed away. When you’ve shared your life with a beloved spouse and companion for decades, it can be like losing the foundation of your existence when that person dies. For this reason, it’s important to provide extra emotional and social support to recent widows and widowers while they are grieving. Do more than bring flowers; go the extra mile and spend more time with the senior in the days and weeks following his or her loss. This can make all the difference for the bereaved senior’s well-being, and it helps to encourage a healthy grieving process rather than a spiral into prolonged depression and isolation.

13. Identification of Socially Isolated Seniors by Public Health Professionals

Often family members will be the first to notice when social isolation is affecting a senior’s well-being, but not all seniors have the benefit of loved ones who live nearby and can check on their well-being. For this reason, public health professionals should be on the lookout for signs of social isolation problems in their clients and patients so that appropriate interventions can be arranged. After all, nothing can be done to help socially isolated seniors if no

one recognizes that they are socially isolated. Beck Squires notes in an [article for AARP](#) that health professionals should be especially aware of social isolation in particular groups of older adults, such as gay and lesbian seniors who are unlikely to have grown-children who can help oversee their well-being or spot signs of social isolation.

14. Help Out a Caregiver in Your Life

Family caregivers who are helping to care for an elderly loved one probably don't consider themselves seniors and are also probably more concerned about the social well-being of the person they are caring for than their own social well-being. But many caregivers are 50+ and caregiving itself can actually trigger social isolation. In Squires' AARP article, she summarizes the social and health risks of caregiving: "Caregivers often work by themselves, and more than half (53%) say they have less time for friends and family. All too often, they don't call doctors when they are sick, and they have little or no time to exercise or eat well. Studies show that up to 70% of caregivers have clinically significant symptoms of depression." If you are a caregiver, remember to take care yourself. It's not just the person you are caring for who's at risk of social isolation, it is you. And if you know a caregiver, or a loved one in your family shoulders the burden of caregiving for an elderly family member, take whatever steps you can to make that person's life easier and to allow them to have a social life of their own.

Have you helped a senior loved one overcome isolation? Share your story with us in the comments below.

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