

PRINT-The pandemic loosens its grip, but loneliness epidemic keeps a tight hold

While society adjusts to the new normal of work, family, social interaction, along with an easing of health and safety protocols post-pandemic, behavioral health leaders say the residual impact on increasing loneliness among all age groups and populations can't be ignored.

Research has found that social isolation significantly increases a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.

For example, a study, published by [Jama Network Open](#) establishes a link between social isolation and blood-clotting protein levels which can contribute to stroke or heart attacks in older women. Being lonely could trigger flight and fight stress levels of fibrinogen which usually spikes in case of blood loss and injury.

Most of us understand that getting older can mean a loss of friends and a greater feeling of loneliness but in recent years, researchers have found millennials are feeling lonelier than Baby Boomers.

According to [a study by Cigna](#), young adults are twice as likely to be lonely than seniors. Seventy-nine percent of adults aged 18 to 24 report feeling lonely compared to 41% of seniors aged 66 and older. This is consistent with earlier research.

Morgan Hurtado of Bloomington, Illinois is in her early 30s and has three younger boys. She works days. Her husband works second shift. Weekends are spent with her oldest boy's travel soccer team. But, Hurtado lives where she grew up and has longtime friends nearby. However, she says at least one other millennial friend has moved and feels very disconnected.

"I see him a lot on social media just doing things by himself or maybe on Snapchat just sitting at home, watching TV, not really going out and having face-to-face interactions in a large group setting where there, being a metropolitan area, there's plenty of opportunity to do that," she shared.

OSF HealthCare Behavioral Health Director Cheryl Crowe says many millennials are focused on developing and advancing in their careers which often takes them away from their family and friends.

"We're now a very mobile workforce. Previously the kids who came back home worked and they were by family and they still had their high school friends. That dynamic is fading quite a bit," she suggested.

Crowe points out loneliness is not about being physically alone but it speaks to a loss of feeling connected through meaningful relationships. Other studies have decisively linked heavy social media and internet use with both loneliness and depression. Crowe says it's certainly a contributing factor with an age group which tends to spend more time on the internet and social media.

"When you are on social media, a lot of what you're seeing is not reality. What we post are our best situations, our best self, our best opportunities and often when we look at that, we may not measure up to what our friends are doing or what our acquaintances are doing," according to Crowe.

As Hurtado began reflecting, the mom realized she mostly relies on her family for intimate discussions and support. She is challenging herself to get out of her comfort zone and make more in-person connections.

"Something I'm trying in my personal life as sort of an experiment if you will, is to limit my social media interactions or just limit my time as a whole on social media, forcing me to have those in-person interactions more often and maybe leading to new relationships, friendships."

Pandemic effect on older seniors in nursing homes

[Newer research from the AARP Foundation](#) showed the consequences of isolation and loneliness on nursing home residents' quality of life are alarming: 50% increased risk of developing dementia, a 32% increased risk of stroke and a nearly fourfold increased risk of death among heart failure patients. That study was conducted in 2020, the first full year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Denise Dechow (pronounced DECK-oh), DO, a psychiatrist at OSF HealthCare who specializes in geriatric care, says long term care shutdowns left a lasting impact. Patients who had trouble hearing and seeing really struggled with the technology that allowed virtual visits with family, friends or medical providers.

Some nursing homes with COVID-19 outbreaks required patients to remain in their rooms, so residents experienced even more isolation than usual. That, in turn, affected their physical and mental health, Dr. Dechow says.

“Feelings of loneliness can lead to increased risk of depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, aggression, impulsivity and suicidal thoughts.”

AARP Foundation analyzed federal data and found 1 in 8 nursing home residents passed away from COVID-19. At the same time, the pandemic prevented many people from gathering and holding funerals. That was particularly hard on older seniors who saw their fellow long term care residents, or in some cases, lifelong friends pass away.

Dr. Dechow says grieving is more challenging without access to the rituals that might make it more bearable. There is a condition called [Prolonged Grief Disorder](#) (PGD). In complicated grief, painful emotions are so long lasting and severe, individuals have trouble recovering from the loss.

“And this has to do with prolonging symptoms of anxiety, depression, sadness and sleep disturbance. What we notice is that we can't *not* participate in these rituals. These are important and must take place, even if it's a year after someone has passed.”

The risk of PGD is higher in older adults and those with a psychiatric history. Dr. Dechow says health care providers are going to have to recognize symptoms of this relatively newly defined disorder and make proper referrals.

Are you at risk for loneliness and social isolation? Check out [this National Institutes of Health infographic](#) for a list of risk factors and 5 ways to stay more connected.

[OSF Silver Cloud](#) is a free online tool and phone app to help manage the feelings and causes of depression, anxiety or stress. OSF HealthCare also offers free [behavioral health navigation services](#) to help understand all resources available to you.