



SOCIAL ISOLATION OF SENIORS







Social Isolation of Seniors

Humans are social beings - designed to thrive in collaborative networks and communities. When we feel connected to others in meaningful ways we experience significant benefits to both our physical and emotional well being.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, many people aren't able to maintain a healthy level of social inclusion, and may experience the harmful consequences of becoming isolated.

**Social Isolation is defined as
a state of complete or near
complete lack of contact between
an individual and society.**

Isolation can be an issue for people of any age, however, as we age, the impact of becoming socially isolated can be more detrimental to our well being.

This resource will primarily explore the experience of social isolation as it relates to older adults.

The goal is to assist in the recognition of those at risk in the community, and to better equip individuals to help out.

Causes

Not all people experience 'aloneness' in the same way. Individuals have different needs with respect to both the quantity and quality of their interactions with friends, family, neighbours and acquaintances.

Some individuals choose isolation as a preferred lifestyle, and may cope reasonably well. Far more commonly, however, people have isolation imposed upon them by circumstances beyond their control.



Isolation may emerge suddenly as the result of a major life change, such as the loss of a spouse or the onset of an illness or disability.

Conversely, isolation may arise gradually over time. Life events can compound causing a downward spiral with harmful consequences. For example, a person affected by depression, social anxiety, mental illness and/or alcoholism may start to feel uncomfortable around other people, and may isolate themselves. This could lead to regression of their social skills - which might inhibit their ability to access health care and social services – leading to further isolation.

How much each event or life change affects people very much depends upon the personal, material and social resources that they have available to them to help cope. Seniors can be very resilient, drawing upon life experience to help them manage in difficult times ... but too many changes, especially consecutive events, may make coping difficult.

Risk Factors

Circumstances that can contribute to an individual's risk of becoming isolated include:

- **living alone**
- **being 80 or older**
- **decline in physical health**
- **decline in mental and/or cognitive health**
- **loss of a life partner**
- **moving to a new residence/community**
- **small social network**
- **sole care-provider for a loved one**
- **lack of access to transportation**
- **mobility restrictions**
- **low income/ poverty**
- **dependencies/addictions**
- **social exclusion (marginalization)**
- **unemployment/under employment**
- **lack of access to appropriate housing**
- **language/cultural barriers with limited access to community supports and/or health services**

Many risk factors for social isolation are life circumstances from which an individual may not be able to remove themselves.

Individuals at risk may not have insight into their own situation.

A brief conversation with a neighbour every now and again may be just enough to make them feel that they have an outlet should they ever need to talk.

The impact that even this small gesture might have on an individual's well-being cannot be overstated.

Health Consequences of Social Isolation

As an empathetic person, you may find yourself relating to some of the things you've read so far.

Most of us can think of a time in our life where we felt alone, maybe even rejected, defeated, or ostracized - and the emotions that accompanied the experience.

Social isolation, however, goes beyond perceived loneliness.

Social isolation refers to scenarios where individuals experience a literal disconnect from their community, and as a consequence, their health, well being and quality of life may all be adversely impacted.



Consequences of Social Isolation

- an increase in negative health behaviours including drinking, drug dependency, smoking, being sedentary and not eating well.
- poor sleep
- a higher likelihood of falls
- poorer general health, and significantly greater risk of hospitalization
- higher rates of mental health issues going unchecked and untreated, including depression

- **increased prevalence of cognitive decline and dementia**
- **overall reduced quality of life**
- **caregiver burden/burnout**
- **higher incidence of chronic disease**
- **higher mortality rates**

Studies have indicated that social isolation is a bigger health risk to Seniors than factors such as physical inactivity and obesity - even suggesting that its negative impact is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes per day.



Increased Vulnerability to Abuse

Isolation is also a major risk factor for becoming a victim of Elder Abuse.

Older adults with low levels of social support are significantly more likely to be mistreated, exploited or suffer from neglect.

Vulnerability can be the result of an over-dependence on a sole care provider – very often a family member. An individual may have only one person in their life to help them with their day to day activities. As such, a great deal of trust is placed upon that individual, and in the wrong hands, this type of relationship of trust can easily become one of abused power and control.

Another common form of abuse prevails in those who find themselves isolated and vying for social interaction by becoming friendly

with strangers, even on the telephone or when they knock at their doors.

Sadly, there are criminals looking to take advantage of older individuals in this situation. These predators seek to become more involved in their victim's life, eventually gaining access to bank accounts and usurping property rights and financial benefits.



It is important to keep in mind that isolation is not only a risk factor for Elder Abuse, it may also be a symptom.

Abusers often use isolation as a tactic, such that their victims are unable to let others know what is happening to them.

Signs of mistreatment may present. The more alert we are as a community, the more likely we are to recognize when someone is living at risk.

Red Flags

- **seniors withdrawal from established social circles**
- **less frequent social interactions**
- **less visits from family and friends who were previously involved**
- **cancellation of medical appointments**
- **discontinuation of health and/or home support services**
- **weight loss**
- **lack of basic hygiene**
- **the living area is cluttered or dirty**

- unexplained and/or untreated injuries
- soiled clothing or clothing inappropriate for the season
- a 'new friend' or previously uninvolved family member suddenly becoming very involved in a Senior's life
- sudden changes in mood and demeanour
- the onset of confusion, depression or apathy
- being hesitant to speak freely
- a care provider/family member regularly speaking on behalf a Senior, or not allowing the Senior to be alone with anyone else
- medical aids, such as hearing aids, glasses, walkers etc being lost or broken and not getting replaced
- changes to long established banking/spending patterns
- unpaid bills
- possessions frequently getting lost or misplaced
- changes to legal documents such as Powers of Attorney and Wills
- transferring property rights

What can you do?

The abuse of someone who is socially isolated is difficult to detect. This type of mistreatment, by its nature, occurs 'behind closed doors'.

The opportunities we will have as a community to observe signs of isolation will be few.

Abuse often comes at the hands of a close friend or family member, making it unlikely that victims will want to talk openly about it.

The simple act of 'keeping in touch' or 'checking in' may well be the difference between someone's feeling hopeless and their feeling that help might be available if/when they decide it's time to seek it.

Your being available as a 'small window to the outside world' could be life altering and may be as far as you ever need to go.

If you're comfortable taking the conversation a little bit further - and you're certain that it's safe for everyone, including yourself, to do so, you'll want to start out with very general questions.

Victims of abuse may be very hesitant, and at times fearful, to say anything about their situation. It is unlikely you'll receive meaningful answers if you're too direct.

Questions like 'How are things going for you here?', 'Do you have somebody to help you out with cooking/banking etc?' or 'Is there anything you're having trouble with?' are good conversation openers.

When and Where to Report?

What if something you've seen or heard has left you feeling uncomfortable? What can you do? As a first step, talk to the Senior directly and find out how they feel. It is important to remember that even if someone's standard of living is below your own, they may be quite comfortable and wish to be 'left alone'.

People do have a right to live with a level of risk that is acceptable to them.

Having said that, there are times that individuals won't have the ability to understand that their situation is unsafe, and where making a call to a community service or even the Police, on their behalf, is appropriate.

This can make for some difficult decisions for concerned citizens. In these cases, you're never wrong making a call to an appropriate resource to ask some general questions. A quick phone conversation with someone who is knowledgeable about Elder Abuse might help to shed some light on the situation, and let you know what options might be available.

Resources & Tools

Toronto Seniors Helpline (416) 217- 2077

This one phone number serves as a single point of access for a multitude of services for Seniors in varying levels of crisis, including:

- mental health and addictions
- elder abuse concerns
- challenges associated with dementia
- anxiety/depression/suicidal thoughts
- chronic health concerns
- life adjustment issues
- meals on wheels
- social programs
- housing supports
- support for care partners

The Seniors Helpline provides access to services across a broad spectrum, including:

- telephone support,
- in-person outreach,
- crisis intervention,
- and warm transition to follow up case management as required.

Calls can be placed directly by the Senior themselves, or by anyone at all in the community who is concerned about a Senior's wellbeing. You don't need the person's consent to make the initial call, and you don't need to know specifically what

type of support they need. You need only feel that the Senior is living in an undesirable situation, and feel that they may benefit from some level of intervention.

This is a Toronto wide service, and interpreters in 100+ languages are available.

This is not a 24 hour Service ... missed calls will be returned.

Seniors Safety Line **1 (866) 299-1011**

A province wide service that provides information and resources, in over 150 languages, for seniors experiencing abuse.

It is a 24/7, confidential line, staffed with trained counsellors who can provide safety planning and supportive counselling for older adults.

Family members and service providers can also call for information about community services.

Advocacy Centre for the Elderly **(ACE) (416) 598-2656**

ACE provides direct legal services to low income Seniors. They are a community

based, legal aid clinic, who specialize in areas of law most relevant to the Senior population.

They very much prefer to speak directly the Senior, as opposed to those with third party concerns. As such, this should be considered a resource that one might suggest to a Senior.

**The Office of the Public Guardian
and Trustee: 1 (800) 366-0335
Guardianship Investigations Unit :
(416) 327-6348**

Will conduct an investigation when it receives information that :

- an individual may be mentally incapable, AND,
- at risk of suffering serious financial or personal harm.

This is not an immediate, emergency crisis response service.

An investigation may result in the OPGT asking the court for authority to make decisions on the person's behalf on a temporary basis.

Anyone with concerns may call, but keep in mind that the OPGT should be considered a 'last resort' intervention, after other options have been exhausted.

Toronto Police Service

911 - emergency

(416) 808-2222 - non-emergency

There are a number of ways the police might be able to help someone who is isolated.

- If a person is a victim of elder abuse, there may be grounds for criminal charges against the abuser. Even where those grounds don't exist, police involvement may be an important step in protecting the victim from further abuse.
- If there are concerns of neglect or self-neglect, or of a Senior's ability to safely care for themselves, police can conduct a well-being check.
- Police officers also have an important function as connectors to services. Officers can make referrals to community supports on behalf of those in need who would never, or could never, ask for help themselves.

Toronto Crime Stoppers **(416) 222-TIPS (8477)**

Crime Stoppers enables concerned members of the public to *anonymously* provide Police with information about crime or potential crime. Callers are never required to give their names or testify in court.

Legal Aid Ontario **1 (800) 668-8258**

LAO's mandate is to promote access to justice throughout Ontario for low-income individuals by means of providing consistently high quality legal aid services in a cost-effective and efficient manner.

Justice Net **1 (866) 919-3219**

JusticeNet is a not-for-profit service helping people in need of legal expertise, whose income is too high to access legal aid and too low to afford standard legal fees.

Assaulted Women's Helpline (416) 863-0511

For over 30 years, the Assaulted Women's Helpline has served as a free, anonymous and confidential 24-hour telephone and TTY crisis telephone line to all women in the province of Ontario who have experienced any form of abuse.

Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre 1 (888) 495-8501

Consumer Rights Inquiry Line 1 (800) 889-9708

Prevention / Reduction

All of these resources have the potential to positively impact the life of an isolated senior. Unfortunately, each also has its limitations.

Abusive isolation scenarios are very complicated and solutions can be elusive. And though it is beneficial to raise awareness around supports and services that might

help a senior that is isolated, it is equally important that we strive to combat social isolation by preventing those at risk from becoming isolated in the first place.

‘An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’

One of the best ways that we, as a society, can promote the well-being of our Senior population is to try and foster communities in which they feel valued and included.

When an older person has opportunities for employment, or for volunteer work, or even just to keep up with interests or recreational pursuits, it allows them to remain active and to maintain meaningful social connections.

Awareness is emerging on just how significant the impact of increased social connectedness can be on our health.

Health practitioners are now writing ‘social prescriptions’ – such as attending a museum or taking a yoga class, to treat patients whose anxiety or loneliness is affecting their well-being.

What might be most encouraging about this approach to addressing health issues related to loneliness, is that you don't need to be a Doctor to make a difference.

Every kind gesture you make, every time you include someone who feels left out and every time you're respectful to anyone, of any age, you're helping to build a connected community.

If you're concerned that someone in your life is at risk of becoming isolated, consider ways that you might contribute to their feeling included.

Simple things like inviting them to join you for a meal or offering a ride to a place of worship, or to a social group that they've stopped attending, might be enough to break a potentially harmful cycle. Or, as mentioned earlier, knock on the door and say hello.

The goal of this resource was to shed some light on a prominent social issue that far too often goes unnoticed.

Those living in isolation often do so in silence and without the knowledge, or even

the hope, that a better life might be available to them. The problem exists on a significant scale, but as you now know, solutions don't always need to be overly complex.

You've seen that a simple 'check in' might be enough to break a cycle of isolation, and that including an at-risk senior in social activity might keep them from entering that cycle in the first place. You've also learned about some organizations in Toronto whose services might benefit those who are already isolated and/or living with abuse.

Most importantly, however, you've learned how essential everyday citizens are in society's quest to combat social isolation. As family, friends and neighbours who remain engaged in our communities, we all have the ability to impact the lives of others through even small gestures.

Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet, and for keeping an eye on one another.

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