



SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

Editorial

HOW DO WE CONFRONT THE PANDEMIC OF LONELINESS?

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Recently an article appeared in the Toronto Star stating that Toronto is one of the loneliest cities in Canada (Kopun, 2023). But Toronto is not the only place where a large number of people of all ages, but especially elders, feel lonely. Loneliness has grown to pandemic proportions in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. Governments at all levels seem to be ignoring this reality.

During this holiday season, people are again entering a period of loneliness. For elders, the spectre of lost loved ones is particularly acute.

Loneliness and Social Isolation Are Serious Health Risks

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) has documented the serious health conditions caused by loneliness and social isolation. These include:

- Premature death from all causes, “a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.”
- About a 50% increased risk of dementia.
- A 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.
- Higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.
- Among “heart failure patients loneliness was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and 57% increased risk of emergency department visits.”

Vulnerable older adults, especially in immigrant and LGBTQ communities are at higher risk.

The U.K. Takes Loneliness Seriously

As Canadian governments ignore the problem, the U.K. is taking it seriously. It has a Minister of Loneliness and has a loneliness awareness week. And it is funding non-profits across the country to tackle the problem, and launching a major public education campaign. A cross-sector group of organisations – the Tackling Loneliness Network has been formed and has issued its first report (Gov.UK, 2021).

Befriending Networks are being established whereby volunteers check in on and visit people who are at risk of loneliness and socially isolated.

In Ontario some non-profit agencies already have friendly visitor programs, but these need to be greatly expanded.

What Can Each of Us Do?

Over the past three and a half years Seniors for Social Action Ontario has learned that if we wait for government to do something, we may be waiting forever.

Loneliness is something we can all take individual action to do something about. All of us know people who are probably lonely. We may feel lonely often ourselves and are embarrassed to talk about it. But there are some immediate things that we can all do.

- **Pick up the phone.** If you have lost touch with friends or family who you would like to see, pick up the phone and call them, tell them you have been thinking of them and perhaps invite them to coffee or an outing of some sort;
- **Start talking to neighbors.** Organize a coffee and snacks get together with a couple of neighbors at a time since COVID precautions still need to be taken. Invite them over and ask a bit about them and their families.
- **Volunteer.** There are so many organizations that could use a bit of help from food banks to library tutoring programs for children. Volunteer Centres exist in almost every community and often list volunteer opportunities. Consider what skills and knowledge you possess and how these could be put to good use.
- **Join a Club.** PROBUS and Service Clubs exist across the province. Some have social orientations and some provide fundraising and service support to community people.
- **Pursue Your Faith.** If you have stopped regularly taking part in faith activities, now is the time to get re-involved. Most churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues have regular social activities, and some have friendly visitors and other activities available.
- **Take a walk.** It is amazing how often you may meet people just by walking around your community, engaging shop keepers, having a coffee at a local café. Walking is also a good antidote for depression and anxiety.
- **Foster a senior dog.** Dogs in shelters are lonely too. Fostering an older dog will get you both out for walks and you will meet other dog owners.
- **If you are a person with a disability who finds it difficult to get out** call the volunteer centre and tell them you would love some help to get out a bit or call your local community-based agency that offers a friendly visiting program.
- **Reframe your thoughts.** As we get older it is easy to feel anxious or depressed because of negative thinking. Thought reframing can help us to continue to live life to the fullest. None of us knows how long we will live, so enjoying life as much as possible is the goal. For information on thought reframing: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/challenge-negative-thinking/>

It can be difficult to overcome depression and loneliness, especially at this time of year, and social media often does not help that situation. Taking the first step, and getting out a bit can work wonders, and you may end up cheering up others in the process. There is a saying:



Be the change.

REFERENCES

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