

HOW TO REDUCE LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION AND CONNECTED HEALTH RISKS

You care for an elderly parent, relative or sick friend. Perhaps you call, to brighten up their day. Maybe you do much more. Bringing happiness to their life is very rewarding but can sometimes be challenging.

However, you can't be there all the time. Studies show that loneliness and social isolation can impact gravely on quality of life and well-being. There's a significant and lasting effect on blood pressure [1], and links to poor sleep [2], dementia and Alzheimer's [3], depression [4] and higher mortality rates [5]. What can you do?

Konnekt's series of articles helps you improve the quality of life for the elderly or sick you care about. In this **part 5**, we discuss the physical and psychological health problems shown to be connected to loneliness and social isolation, and consider ways to improve the happiness and well-being of those who are often on their own.

5. Loneliness and social isolation

Since her husband passed away, Aunt Linda has lived by herself. She values her independence, loves her home, knows her neighbours and walks to her local shops.

Even though Linda's relatives phone her often, it's not nearly enough to replace the frequent company of an adult. Linda misses seeing the face-to-face interaction, seeing the smiles of her children and watching her grandkids grow.

Social isolation is defined as the virtual absence of interaction with others, outside of that required to perform basic life functions, such as food shopping, transportation, work and entertainment. Social isolation is common in the disabled, divorced and elderly, as well as in those with mental disorders and alcoholism, and is a risk factor for both suicide and deaths from all causes [6]. It is not the same as loneliness rooted in a temporary lack of contact with other humans.

The isolated can feel they have no one to turn to in personal emergencies, no one to confide in during a crisis, and no one against which to measure their own behaviour – which can lead to undesirable behaviours and problems interacting with others.

Social relationships encourage health-promoting behaviours such as adequate sleep, diet, exercise and medication compliance, and discourage health-damaging behaviours such as smoking, excessive eating and alcohol abuse. The magnitude of risk associated with social isolation is comparable to cigarette smoking [7].

How can you reduce the feelings of loneliness and social isolation of your "Aunt Linda" or parent?

A smile is a curve that makes everything straight

Thanks to her clever kids, Aunt Linda doesn't feel so lonely. You can do the same for your loved one:

- **Photos.** Linda now has a digital photo frame that displays a loop of pictures of smiling family members and friends. This is not enough but it does remind Linda to call.
- **Pet.** Linda's cocker spaniel is a great companion. It helps keep her active and often brings a smile to her face. Studies show that pets can help control blood pressure during times of mental stress [8], assist with Alzheimer's disease [9] and help ameliorate depression [10]. Many aged care homes now allow pets, have live-in pets such as dogs, cats or birds, or arrange pet visits to nearby farms or in-house visits from mobile farms.
- **Robots.** Robot pet companions (such as baby seals) that respond to human interaction are starting to make an appearance in Aged Care homes. They can offer comfort and increase activity of those with advanced dementia.
- **Community service visits and outings.** The local council and church group organised weekly visits to chat with Linda in her own home. This doesn't work for everyone. Linda preferred her weekly outings with an organised group that she already trusted and could relate to. Visits from volunteers can be helpful for some, but are generally not a substitute for face-to-face time with family and close friends.
- **Scheduled visits.** Linda now keeps a calendar on her wall to keep track of visits and appointments. Every day, she eagerly visits the calendar to see who will visit. Her friends and relatives know about the calendar and help out by planning their visits on different days, so that there are fewer days that she doesn't have a visitor. It removes the uncertainty for her and – knowing that her visitors will ask – it puts some order into her day by motivating her to get out of bed, dress up, eat and drink correctly, take her medication on time and perhaps go for a walk.

Frequent social contact has been shown to help us stay on track mentally and sleep more regularly, and to help prevent development of anti-social behaviours [11].

- **Quality time.** Linda's visitors try to spend time doing fun things with her rather than cleaning the house or dragging her through the aisles of a shopping centre for groceries. They now shop online and pay someone else to clean, so they can spend their own visits talking, going out for coffee, visiting galleries, seeing plays and going over old photos together. The visits are fun and really give Linda something to look forward to!
- **Work from Aunt's office.** Nephew George arranged an Internet connection for his Aunt Linda. George has the freedom to work from home occasionally, so once a week he works from Aunt Linda's place – just to be there. She feels safer, loves to just sit in the same room and does her crossword puzzle whenever he is on the phone. As a side benefit, he remembers to take a healthy break when she brings him cups of tea, home-cooked meals, delicious desserts from the local bakery and the occasional present.

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Conclusion

In this article, we've suggested some up-to-date suggestions, helpful products and social services to improve the happiness and well-being of those who are often on their own, and we've discussed the physical and psychological health problems shown to be connected to loneliness and social isolation.

Konnekt is an Australian company that has developed an incredibly simple, one-touch Videophone. The elderly and sick can talk **face-to-face** with family and friends, as often as they want, without the travel. To learn about the Konnekt Videophone or to subscribe to receive future Konnekt articles with tips to help improve quality of life, visit Konnekt at www.konnekt.com.au.

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