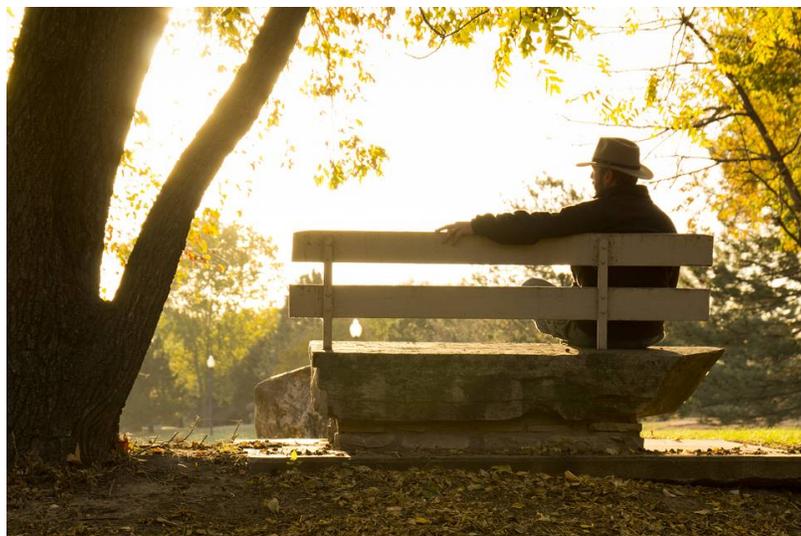


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RETIREMENT

The Epidemic of Loneliness—and How to Combat It



Experts suggest that loneliness can increase the risk of premature death by 30%, says Paul Irving of the Center for the Future of Aging at the Milken Institute. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



By

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Loneliness is a recurring theme in classic songs, from Elvis Presley’s “Are You Lonesome Tonight” to “Hank Williams’ “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.”

But it’s not just artists that feel the pain.

Loneliness is a growing public health problem—a hidden epidemic threatening our well-being, and even our livelihood. One-third of Americans over age 45 feel lonely, according to AARP.

Researchers at Britain's Brunel University found the prevalence of loneliness especially high among those under 25 and over 65 years old.

Modern life may be the culprit. More people live alone than ever before—about one-third of Americans older than 65 and half of those over 85, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Marriage and fertility rates have fallen. People are more mobile and more likely to live apart from friends and family than in past generations.

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Studies have shown that social connection and the quality of relationships are predictors of physical health, longevity and quality of life. People with less meaningful connections experience disrupted sleep patterns, altered immune systems, more inflammation and higher levels of stress. Experts suggest that loneliness can increase the risk of premature death by 30%, making it

as risky as obesity and as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Quality relationships can also enhance a sense of security and protect against mental ailments and memory loss. With Alzheimer's disease costing America more than a quarter of a trillion dollars a year, it is essential to identify not only cures but prevention opportunities.

Recognizing the increasing risks of loneliness, British Prime Minister Theresa May recently appointed a minister for loneliness. As America's baby-boom generation ages and the number of people living alone continues to rise, it might well be time for us to follow Prime Minister May's lead.

What can be done? A lot.

Social and faith institutions can facilitate reciprocal bonds among their members. Health organizations can invest in preventive interventions that are taken as seriously as weight management and smoking cessation. Academic institutions can recruit students of all ages, encouraging lifelong learning and intergenerational links. Retirement communities can promote companionship. Neighbors can reach out to those in need.

On the work front, companies can reform retirement practices to enable older workers to stay meaningfully involved. Rather than exiting their older workers, employers can retain them, redefining roles and building age-diverse teams that integrate the energy and speed of youth and the wisdom and experience of age. With increasing evidence that mixed-age teams may outperform both exclusively young and exclusively old teams, employers can foster

intergenerational collaboration, mentorship and deeper employee relationships—reducing isolation and loneliness and increasing workforce effectiveness in the bargain.

Potentially the most compelling strategy to tackle loneliness in older populations is providing opportunities to volunteer and serve others, particularly young people. Numerous studies confirm that purposeful social interaction not only decreases isolation and its detrimental effects, but it improves health and well-being.

THE EXPERTS



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Research at Harvard University found that older people who mentored younger people were far more likely than their uninvolved peers to experience joy instead of despair. Studies on AARP's Experience Corps intergenerational literacy program by researchers at Washington University and John Hopkins University further prove the

point. Volunteers showed increased physical and mental health, enhanced social engagement, lower rates of depression, and an enhanced sense of purpose by participating in the program. While older volunteers were helping children, the children were helping them as well.

Research on the federally funded Corporation for National and Community Service's Foster Grandparents program, which provides volunteers age 55 and over an opportunity to serve children and youth in their communities, determined that most active participants reported almost never feeling lonely unlike those on a waiting list to join the program. The recent federal spending bill thankfully spared Foster Grandparents and similar programs from threatened elimination. But additional funding is needed to enable participation by many older adults in need of connection and to improve the lives of the younger people who can benefit from their service.

Meanwhile, new approaches are being advanced. The Motion Picture & Television Fund's The Daily Call Sheet organizes volunteers to call isolated industry members. Encore.org's five-year Generation to Generation campaign aims to mobilize one million adults over age 50 to help young people thrive. With an understanding that older people have talents and life experiences to share and that younger people can benefit from their support, Generation to Generation has already involved more than one hundred partner organizations in its drive to elevate and celebrate volunteerism.

U.S. policymakers are beginning to take notice. A 2017 U.S. Senate hearing, "Aging Without Community: The Consequences of Isolation and Loneliness," recognized the challenges and explored potential strategies to reduce isolation and loneliness among older Americans, including further supporting programs such as Meal on Wheels, rural broadband development and innovative transportation services. While there may be progress, much more must be done.

By recognizing the magnitude of the loneliness epidemic, confronting the realities and developing solutions, we can improve lives, communities and businesses. Instead of songs of loneliness, we'll be humming a different tune, something like the Beatles lyrics "I get by with a little help from my friends."

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