



Care Partner Information

Tips for Providing Older Adult Care

Social Isolation and Loneliness

Social isolation is when someone does not have a lot of contact with other people. Loneliness is the feeling of being alone — even if they are with other people. Social isolation and loneliness do not go hand-in-hand. Not everyone who is alone feels lonely. However, many older adults are both socially isolated and lonely. Either can be bad for a person's health and quality of life. There are many reasons an older adult might be isolated or lonely, including depression. Start by looking into why the person is isolated or lonely, and ways to help.

Below are some reasons older adults are isolated or lonely, and tips that can help.

- **Retirement.** Even if the older adult chose to retire, they can feel isolated from less daily contact with others. **Tip:** Finding a new social group or volunteering can help.
- **Widowhood.** After the death of a spouse or long-term partner, new widows and widowers often live alone for the first time in years, or maybe for the first time ever. **Tip:** Peer support programs can help by matching the person with a senior volunteer who can spend time playing cards, talking, or doing other fun activities.
- **Moving.** Older adults move for many reasons, such as to a smaller house, to a retirement community, or to be closer to family. Some of these moves are by choice, and some are not. All of these moves can change a person's social contacts and may increase isolation and loneliness. **Tip:** Look for social groups in the new community with shared interests. For example, a book club, a group that plays cards, or a faith-based group.
- **Loss of hearing or vision.** Changes to hearing or vision can lead to loneliness and isolation. When older adults lose their vision, it is harder to participate in the same activities — inside and outside the home. Many older adults do not know they have hearing loss because it happens slowly. **Tip:** For those with vision loss, offer to take them to their usual activities. When speaking to an older adult with hearing loss, look directly at them and speak clearly, slowly, and in a lower pitched voice. It is easier for a person with hearing loss to participate in a conversation if the room is quiet, and others speak one at a time. Hearing aids or over-the-counter hearing products also can help.

This Care Partner Information page is part of a series on older adult caregiving tips. They are written to help family and community caregivers, direct care workers and community health representatives care for older adults. Available in English and Spanish at www.aging.arizona.edu

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Caregiver isolation and loneliness

Caregivers can feel more isolated as the person they are caring for needs more help. Often caregivers feel like no one else will do a good job caring for the person. Or they feel guilty when they take time for themselves. Many friends and family members may want to help, but they do not know what to do, or how to ask what is needed. Caregivers may want to write a list of things friends and family can do, and ask them for help.

Support groups for caregivers can also help. Support groups can lead to new friendships with people who share the same experience. These friends may also have new ideas to help with caregiving.

Chronic disease, disability and isolation

As chronic diseases and disability get worse, it is common for older adults and their caregivers to be isolated and feel lonely. Both the older adult and their family caregiver often cut back or stop going to work, participating in hobbies or social activities. Sometimes friends and family may stop visiting because it is hard to see a loved one's health get worse. Sometimes older adults will "self-isolate." This is when they choose to stop seeing friends and family.

Reasons people with chronic disease and disability isolate themselves
Depression — it is more common in those with chronic disease
They do not want to burden family or friends with their care needs
They can no longer get around easily — it is easier to stay home

For those who are lonely, it is important to help the person to connect deeply with others, not just have more contacts. Below are some other tips to help.

- Plan visits from friends or family in small settings that are comfortable for the older adult.
- Help the person do the activities and hobbies they enjoy. Identify and, if possible, find solutions for any limitations to doing the activity, such as costs or transportation.
- Focus on the relationship, not the activity.

Useful Resources

Use the Eldercare Locator to find local support services for older adults and caregivers:

<http://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Index.aspx> or 1-800-677-1116.

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