



## Social Isolation: A Public Health Epidemic

According to the AARP Foundation, **nearly 1 in 5 Americans 65 and older are socially isolated, and this public health epidemic affects more than 8 million age 50 plus adults.** “Social isolation is a problem that receives relatively little attention and sustained focus, but it undermines the health and well-being of millions of older adults,” says AARP Foundation President Lisa Marsh Ryerson.

A study by professors Julianne Holt-Lunstad and Timothy Smith of Brigham Young University found that prolonged social **isolation is as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and is more harmful than obesity.** Social isolation has been linked to higher blood pressure, greater susceptibility to the flu and other infectious diseases, and earlier onset of dementia.

Preventing and reducing loneliness could not only benefit the health and well-being of older adults, but could also have economic implications for a society with a rapidly growing older adult population.

With these potential consequences in mind, AARP Foundation along with the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, Gerontological Society of America, Give an Hour, and UnitedHealth Group launched the resource [connect2affect](#). This online tool provides information on social isolation, a 12-question assessment to determine if someone is at high, medium or low risk of social isolation, and a searchable directory of programs in local communities that can help older adults escape social isolation.



**What is isolation?** According to the connect2affect website, isolation is more than being alone; it’s the result of feeling detached physically or psychologically, or being disconnected from support groups of family, friends and community.

**Risk factors.** Many risk factors can cause isolation. Some of the most common are reduced mobility, hearing or vision loss, lack of access to affordable transportation, the death of a spouse, retirement, geography, and linguistic and cultural barriers. Additionally, lack of affordable, accessible transportation and other financial challenges can limit crucial social interactions, as well as the ability to get medical care or healthy food.

Low-income older adults from underrepresented communities face additional barriers that contribute to isolation, including disparities in access to services or culturally appropriate care.



Ohio's Area Agencies on Aging and other aging network organizations are combatting social isolation among Ohio's older adults in their communities. From home and community-based services, to Age-Friendly initiatives, to caregiver support groups, to social functions like "senior proms," organizations are trying many different approaches to impact the problem.



Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio  
Senior Prom 2018

**Jodi Warnecke, President of the [Ohio Association of Senior Centers](#) and Executive Director of the Putnam County Council on**

**Aging** says that Ohio's senior centers play a big role in preventing isolation because they provide the opportunity to stay active, engaged and connected during life's transitions by offering a variety of programs such as: transportation, exercise classes, evidenced-based wellness programs, group outings, volunteer opportunities, group meals, fine arts and crafts, music and dance, lifelong learning opportunities and so much more. According to Warnecke, "senior centers help bridge the transition from work life to retirement by providing the opportunity for positive social supports."

Challenges such as transportation, or lack of accessible facilities, or linguistic or cultural barriers can be overcome with a little creativity and planning. Warnecke shared that technology is another avenue senior centers use to help seniors stay connected. "Centers around the state have offered "Bring Your Device" workshops to help seniors understand their mobile devices and tablets so they can stay in touch with family and friends," she stated.

Social isolation can result in older adults being more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and neglect. **Natasha Pietrocola, Deputy Administrator, Programs and Services, Cuyahoga County Department of Senior and Adult Services, and Chair of the [Ohio Coalition of Adult Protective Services](#)**, indicated that isolation is a situation they see all too often in adult protective services cases. "When a senior is isolated and loses touch with previous support networks, such as neighbors, friends, and family; not only emotionally do they suffer, but there also grows the propensity to be manipulated or taken advantage of by others who do not have that senior's best interest at heart."





“We often see this as a prime avenue for financial exploitation to occur. A perpetrator will often infiltrate the senior’s life and may even start the relationship off as a caregiver or friend,” she stated. “Once the trust is established, or undue influence occurs, the relationship will take a turn for the worse and no one has oversight into that person’s affair to see the damage that may be occurring to financial resources from savings and bank accounts, changes to wills and even the transfer of homes and property.”

There are many ways to get involved. Warnecke suggests that communities be aware of isolated older adults in the community and that community members stay apprised of community resources for older adults.”

Pietrocola says that if adult protective services becomes involved, her agency will often make suggestions regarding living arrangements. They ask, “Would they prefer to downsize and move into a senior community or apartment building, do they require more hands on support and are a candidate for assisted living, or are there family members willing to have them live with them?”



They also encourage senior center participation, as well as options for transportation to places they can socialize and be amongst others, and “engaging in any activity from bingo and church to exercise activities and trips to stay connected to others, Pietrocola says. “With less intact and mobile seniors, it may involve connecting to professionals to offer help in the home (home health care providers) or assistance from others in that senior’s life.”

Connect2affect collects [stories](#) from around the world of ways that individuals and organizations have addressed social isolation, such as the “[Tea Party Raves](#)” being held in London, where the club proudly touts that they are “the only club event in the world where someone was rushed to hospital because they’d forgotten to take their drugs.”

Do you have ideas to share about how to identify socially isolated older people and connect them with others? Share them with Connect2Affect!



For more information:

[Connect2Affect](#)

[Social Isolation: Detrimental to Older Adults' Health and Costly to Medicare](#)

[Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review](#)