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Can Loneliness Be Deadly for the Elderly?

By Rosemary Black

It's a real and hidden danger among the older generation. Here are ways to combat isolation.

Can loneliness be deadly for the elderly? Apparently it's as dangerous as obesity, smoking, and alcohol, according to a recent British summit on loneliness that was reported in *The Independent*.

"Loneliness is the great unspoken public health issue," British Care Services minister Paul Burstow said, according to *The Independent*. "Research suggests it is more harmful to health than obesity and that there is a 50 percent reduction in mortality if you have a strong social network."

Explaining that those who have "day-to-day contact live longer and healthier lives," Burstow said the British government would work with the Campaign to End Loneliness to make people aware of the importance of a phone call or a visit to an elderly person.

Loneliness isn't a problem only among Britain's elderly. It's a big problem in the U.S., too, says Igor Galynker, MD, Ph.D, professor of clinical psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. "You have nuclear families rather than extended families living together," he says. "When the elderly live alone, they are less likely to be complaint about medications. And people who live alone are more likely to be depressed."

How to Help Your Loved One

To help an elderly person beat loneliness, try the following:

- 1. Encourage the individual to become involved with volunteer work,** says Jennifer FitzPatrick, MSW, LCSW-C, author of *Your 24/7 Older Parent* and a consultant for the Alzheimer's Association. "Volunteering increases their sense of accomplishment, purpose and self-esteem," she says. "For the most benefit, the senior should volunteer for a cause he or she values." If the person is a pet lover, for instance, an animal shelter would be an ideal match.
- 2. Encourage joining a senior center.** One reason older adults are lonely is because they've lost friends, spouses, and neighbors. "Senior centers are a great way to meet others who have dealt with similar challenges and are looking for new friends in their age group," FitzPatrick says. "A senior center can be a great way to meet others in similar predicaments."
- 3. Keep in mind that new friendships can include the younger generation.** "Making new friends of other ages can be beneficial," FitzPatrick says. "When making new connections to decrease loneliness, it is best to focus on similar interests and compatibility rather than age." Remember that it's not the quantity of these relationships, but the quality, that is important, says Ed Dwyer, features editor of *AARP The Magazine*. "Try to sense which prospective relationships are promising, and which would be climbing the wrong tree," he says. "For people who tend to be quiet, for example, it's a good idea to select someone who is comfortable with silent companionship."
- 4. Ask if the person would like a pet,** says Cindy David, MSN, APRN, FNP-C, of the Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Center and Hospital in Baltimore, MD. "It's empowering to help someone else," she says. "And it helps to care for other living things, such as a pet."
- 5. Help the individual learn to go online.** "Elderly people can really benefit from a large screen desktop computer or a fancy smart phone if they have the vision and dexterity to use them," says April Masini, who runs *AskApril.com*, an advice website. "This gives them a myriad of information at their fingertips, from music and movies to family websites and photo albums online."
- 6. Coordinate visits to the person and don't confine these visits to holidays.** "Consistent, regular visits are important for lonely elderly people," Masini says. "Team up with your family and make a social network page that is just for your family." Or make a family website and schedule regular visits to the elderly person from various family members. "This lightens the load on visiting family, ensures regular visits for the elderly, and creates a sense of well being for everyone involved," Masini says. Schedule e-mail alerts to let family members know that it is their particular day to visit, and send alerts to the elderly person, too. "This lets them know to expect a visit on a particular day of the week, and from whom," Masini says.

Source:

Cassidy, Sarah. "Loneliness is 'deadly for elderly.' " 16 March 2012. The Independent.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/loneliness-is-deadly-for-the-elderly-7574541.html>