

6 Powerful Ways to Help Seniors Avoid Isolation

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It's an unfortunate reality that many seniors find themselves terribly isolated. After a spouse passes away or a debilitating illness hits, it's common for a senior to be cut off from both friends and family for extended periods of time. Obviously, this isn't intentional on anyone's part – it's simply a disheartening reality.

Isolation is not limited to just a few seniors – it's a significant, widespread problem. As Sarah Stevenson [writes](#):

According to the U.S. Census Bureau 11 million, or 28% of people aged 65 and older, lived alone at the time of the census.

As people get older, their likelihood of living alone only increases. Additionally, more and more older adults do not have children, reports the AARP, and that means fewer family members to provide company and care as those adults become seniors.

Additionally, living in isolation cause serious problems for older [adults](#):

- Increased risk of death
- Mental and physical health problems
- Possibility of elder abuse
- Long term illness
- Depression
- High blood pressure
- Unhealthy behaviors
- And more

It's a problem that can't be ignored, but it also presents some significant challenges. If you're caring for an older adult, how you ensure they receive regular connection with other people? How can they live alone without constantly feeling alone?

Here are 6 simple ways to help older adults feel connected.

Arrange Transportation to and From Social Activities



Perhaps the biggest challenge for many seniors is transportation. As they get older, their eyesight often dims and their reflexes slow. They may voluntarily choose to stop driving or be forced to. And while this may make the roads safer for others, it causes them to keenly feel how alone they are and prevents them from being with friends.

One of the most effective ways you can help the older adult in your life is by making transportation available to them. This can be done in a number of simple ways:

- If you live near them, offer to regularly drive them to and from different social functions.

- Create a network of friends who are willing to occasionally drive them to events. Schedule this transportation to ensure it happens on a regular basis.
- Help them learn the ins and outs of public transportation.
- Find out if community or senior centers offer support services.

Lisa Esposito [writes](#):

If you're concerned that a neighbor – or distant family member – is at risk for isolation, contacting the town's senior center is a good starting point. Many senior centers have social workers to put it all together by determining people's needs and plugging into the right resources. States offer a variety of services for seniors. "In Massachusetts, we have aging service access points," [geriatric worker Carrie] Johnson says. Following an assessment, people are connected to Meals on Wheels, homemaker services (which vary by state but may encompass chores like cleaning, laundry and maintenance), grocery-shopping and other programs. They might need personal care assistants to help with bathing. All these providers add to a person's support system, Johnson says, "both social and kind of eyes on the ground."

Given that transportation is one of, if not the biggest challenge, meeting this need alone can go a long way toward solving the isolation issue.

Encourage Attendance at Places of Worship

While this one will only apply to older adults who are religious, it's certainly a healthy practice. Given the weekly rhythms of most places of worship, they offer a constant, positive place to find social interaction.

Additionally, many attendees of these places are more than willing to help transport seniors to and from their functions. They see it as a way of caring for those in their midst.

Finally, some churches will have ministries specifically geared toward older adults, including transportation to functions, visits from members, and more. You can help the senior in your life avoid isolation by connecting them to a church, mosque, synagogue, or other place of worship where they're comfortable.

Encourage Ownership



One of the great challenges of growing older is that you aren't caring for others as much. When you were younger, you took care of kids or a spouse or house or employees, but as you get older those things tend to fade. The only person depending on you is you.

This can cause older adults to feel unimportant, not needed or wanted, and purposeless. They no longer have anyone depending on them, which can cause them to feel apathetic.

One simple way to help seniors avoid isolation *and* give them a sense of being needed is to give them a pet. The pet provides companionship and is dependent on the owner for feeding, hygiene, and exercise.

Aging Care [notes](#):

Psychologist Penny B. Donnenfeld, who brings her golden retriever mix Sandee to her New York City office, has even witnessed animals' ability to rev up elder owners' memories. "I've seen those with memory loss interact and access memories from long ago," she says. "Having a pet helps the senior focus on something other than physical problems and negative preoccupations about loss or aging."

Additionally, having a pet can create new social connections. It's not uncommon for one dog owner to stop and talk to another dog owner, which can sometimes lead to friendship.

By giving an older adult a pet, you can give them have a fresh sense of being needed, which can infuse life and energy back into them.

Help Them Volunteer

One wonderful way to connect isolated seniors with people is to ask them for help. Volunteering allows them to meaningfully contribute to the lives of others, which can give them a renewed sense of purpose and worth.

The volunteering doesn't need to be complex. Depending on the health of the person, some options include:

- Local schools
- The local library
- The humane society
- The local hospital
- Religious places of worship
- The Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts

If they have a particular skillset, such as accounting or counseling, connect them those who need help in these areas.

There are hundreds of needs that aren't being met, and older adults can easily fill those gaps.

Encourage Their Health



Fewer things create more isolation than poor health. When an older adult has an ongoing health problem, they're much less likely to maintain social contact, often because of discomfort. Additionally, hearing and vision loss can make it challenging and even embarrassing for them to interact with others, causing them to stay away.

One simple way to combat this is to encourage their health in as many ways as possible. Regularly check in on them, asking them how they feel and then paying close attention to any symptoms you notice. Ensure they have a way to get to doctor's appointments and help them get hearing and vision tests.

If they need adaptive technology, such as a walker, hearing aid, or wheelchair, do everything in your power to provide this for them.

Encouraging exercise can also give them enormous benefits. Allison Miller [notes](#):

Research shows multiple benefits of increased physical activity for older adults. A study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine followed older adults' physical activity longitudinally over 18 years (Stessman, Hammerman-Rozenberg, Cohen, Ein-Mor, & Jacobs, 2009).

The research showed that older adults who exercise not only have an increased life span but also experienced a decrease in falls, fractures, and joint and musculoskeletal pain –

(Stessman et al., 2009). In addition, research shows that balance training decreases fall occurrences (Sherrington et al., 2008). Stessman et al.'s (2009) research also demonstrated that as little as 4 hours per week is as effective as more intensive and time-consuming exercise.

By nurturing their health, you can prevent loneliness.

Stay in Touch with Neighbors

Neighbors can be a helpful safety net for seniors. They can keep an eye out for any unexpected problems, check in on the person, and even help with simple household chores. Additionally, the neighbors can help get the senior involved in the community, which can be especially helpful if you live some distance away.

Connecting the senior with the those around them can put extra eyes on them in case something goes wrong.

Conclusion



Getting older can be difficult, especially if you're alone. Loneliness and isolation can create health problems, a sense of purposelessness, depression, and a host of other issues. It's something to be taken seriously.

Thankfully, there are actions that can be taken to ensure the seniors in your life don't experience those things. These actions don't need to be complicated or labor intensive. They simply require some thought and intention.

Betty Friedan said, "Aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength."

We wholeheartedly agree.