Talking to your patients about **loneliness and social isolation**

What are loneliness and social isolation?

Loneliness is the perception of the quality of one's social network, including feelings of sadness, distress or disconnection from others.

Social isolation refers to the size of an individual's social network and indicates the physical separation of someone from his or her support networks.

How loneliness and social isolation impact patient health

- More harmful to your health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day[1]
- 64 percent greater chance of developing clinical dementia[2] and doubles the risk of Alzheimer's[3]
- People with social isolation are 2–5 times more likely to die prematurely than those with strong social ties[4]
- Four times more likely to be re-hospitalized within a year of discharge[5]

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Screening your patients for loneliness

UCLA 3 Question Loneliness Scale[1]
This scale comprises three questions that measure three dimensions of loneliness: relational connectedness, social connectedness and self-perceived isolation.

The questions are:

1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
2. How often do you feel left out?
3. How often do you feel isolated from others?

Each response has a score:

Response	Score
Hardly ever	1
Some of the time	2
Often	3

The scores for each question are added up to give an overall score ranging from 3 to 9.

The scores are quantified as follows:

Score	Loneliness
3	Not lonely
4–6	Lonely
7–9	Severely lonely

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"When we provide care to the geriatric population, we know that supporting their overall health means more than just managing chronic disease. We also have to focus on their social environment since mental health and physical health are so closely linked. **When evaluating patients' loneliness or social isolation, we have to understand that sometimes they will describe feeling tired or a lack of energy and not recognize the underlying cause.**"

Marian G. Irizarry Febres, MD
Conviva West – Hillsborough Tampa, FL

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Sources

[1] https://stayingsharp.aarp.org/art/connect/15/loneliness-dementia.html

[2] Holwerda et al, 2012- https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21896239

[3] https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/482179

[4] Dave Clark (2014) Social Isolation and Physical and Sensory Impairment: Research Findings Report; Bristol City Councilhttps://www.bristol.gov.uk/documents/20182/34732/Social%20isolation%20and%20physical%20and%20sensory%20deprivation_0_0_0.pdf/393c572d-5eeb-4b01-b013-b7139843af8e

[5] Nicolas Nicholson (2012) A Review of Social Isolation: An Important but Underassessed Condition in Older Adults; The Journal of Primary Prevention June 2012, Volume 33, Issue 2, pp 137-152 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22766606

What support is available for your patients?

When speaking to your patients about loneliness, it is important to remember these feelings can be triggered by various life transitions and changes, so appropriate resources and referrals will vary. Understanding the root cause of your patients' loneliness can help you identify individualized resources.

Health insurance plans may have options for services that can help. Encourage your patients to contact their insurance plan by calling the number on their member identification card.

Additionally, they may need assistance in connecting with community resources and programs. **To locate resources in your patients' area, direct them to:**

- Volunteer Matching: www.volunteermatch.org
- Area Agencies on Aging (AAA): www.n4a.org
- Eldercare locator: www.eldercare.gov
- Connect2Affect: www.connect2affect.org
- Lyft for transportation services: www.lyft.com
- Feeding America: www.feedingamerica.org