

# Talking to your patients about loneliness and social isolation

Feelings of loneliness can happen to anyone, anywhere. But as people age, experience hardships or have health challenges, these feelings may occur more often.

People don't always know where to go for support, and they don't understand the serious impact loneliness can have on their health. That's where you and your care team can help.

## LONELINESS VS. SOCIAL ISOLATION

Loneliness is the perception of the quality of a person's social network, including feelings of sadness, distress or disconnection from others. Social isolation refers to the actual size of an individual's social network and the person's physical separation from support networks.

## FEELING MORE CONNECTED MATTERS IN PATIENT HEALTH

In America, **1 in 5 people** always or often feels lonely or socially isolated.<sup>1</sup> For older adults, **up to 43%** feel the impact of loneliness, which can have significant implications for their health<sup>2</sup>, including:



- **40% increased risk of dementia**
- **30% increased risk of stroke or the development of coronary heart disease**
- **Increased risk of early death**
- **Augmented depression or anxiety**
- **Raised levels of stress and sleep impediment**

Loneliness can also lead to long-term “fight-or-flight” stress signaling, which negatively affects immune system functioning and creates more inflammation.<sup>3</sup>

## SCREENING YOUR PATIENTS FOR LONELINESS

During annual wellness exams or regular appointments with patients, screen them for loneliness using the UCLA 3-Question Loneliness Scale, which measures relational connectedness, social connectedness and self-perceived isolation:

- How often do you feel you lack companionship?**
  - a. Hardly ever
  - b. Some of the time
  - c. Often
- How often do you feel left out?**
  - a. Hardly ever
  - b. Some of the time
  - c. Often
- How often do you feel isolated from others?**
  - a. Hardly ever
  - b. Some of the time
  - c. Often

**Calculation:** A response of some of the time or often to any of the questions should trigger a referral for loneliness support.



## WHEN PATIENTS SCREEN POSITIVE FOR LONELINESS, YOU CAN HELP

When talking to patients about loneliness, remember that loneliness and social isolation can be triggered by various things. They might include life changes and transitions, health challenges like hearing or memory loss, isolation after surgery, addiction and mental health problems. Depending on the situation, appropriate resources and referrals will vary. Understanding the root cause of your patients' loneliness can help you create an individualized care plan and set of support resources.

## YOU CAN ALSO REFER YOUR PATIENTS TO THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

### Patients' medical insurance

Some health plans may include mental or behavioral health support. The patient should call the number on the back of their member ID to see what benefits may be available.

### Eldercare Area Agencies on Aging

Through these organizations, your older patients and their caregivers can find trustworthy, local support resources.

**1-800-677-1116 (TTY: 711)**

**[www.eldercare.acl.gov](http://www.eldercare.acl.gov)**

### Connect2Affect

Patients who need transportation, in-home services and more may get help through this online directory created by AARP.

**[www.connect2affect.org](http://www.connect2affect.org)**

### Institute on Aging's Friendship Line

This toll-free line offers friendly conversation and the caring ear of a trained volunteer. Accredited for people age 60 and older as well as adults living with disabilities.

**1-800-971-0016 (TTY: 711),**

**24 hours a day, 7 days a week**

### Anxiety and Depression Association of America

Guide your patients here for useful articles, local help or an online support group to help with anxiety and depression struggles.

**[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)**

### National Transit Hotline

Patients can connect with the local transit services that receive federal money to provide transportation to seniors and individuals with disabilities.

**1-888-446-4511 (TTY: 711),**

**Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. – 5 p.m., Eastern time**

**[www.transit.dot.gov](http://www.transit.dot.gov)**

To learn more about Humana's efforts to address food insecurity and other social determinants of health, visit **[PopulationHealth.Humana.com](https://www.humana.com/populationhealth)** or connect at **[BoldGoal@humana.com](mailto:BoldGoal@humana.com)**.

<sup>1</sup>Kaiser Family Foundation, Aug. 2018, <https://www.kff.org/report-section/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-the-united-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey-introduction/>

<sup>2</sup>Researchers Confront an Epidemic of Loneliness, The New York Times, September 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/health/loneliness-aging-health-effects.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/health/loneliness-aging-health-effects.html?_r=1)

<sup>3</sup>American Psychological Association, "Social isolation: It could kill you," May 2019, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>