

“Loneliness - Lethal for Seniors” & What to Do About It

A recent headline on how loneliness can negatively impact the health and length of the lives of elders in our community is startling. Dr. Carla Perissinotto of UCSF released a study of 1,604 seniors over a six year period that showed a 45% increase in mortality for those who reported being “lonely” as compared to those who were socially engaged.

Also, and somewhat unexpectedly, the study found many seniors who felt lonely were still in long-standing partnerships. They reported sometimes feeling as strangers with their spouses as they aged and the shared interests of yesterday were no longer part of their lives. There is a song from the late 60s, “One”, from the band Three Dog Night with lyrics that start out “*One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do. Two can be as bad as one.*”

What can be done to engage individuals all their lives so that they are connected and find meaning and purpose in longer lives? In the San Francisco Bay Area, we are very fortunate to have a myriad of programs and opportunities for all of us to have vital lives.

Personally, every time I volunteer on any major project, no matter how much energy I expel, the experience leaves me feeling that I have received more than I have given. Many studies I have read over the years say that staying active with any volunteer efforts gives one a sense of “doing something that matters.” This may come from touching lives, helping the environment, supporting wildlife or changing the world - one little measure of kindness at a time. Every senior could be engaged in some volunteer activity as a prescription for health – as we Baby Boomers age, we



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should be researching how we want to stay connected in meaningful ways – now.

For those of us who have aging family members or work with older clients, let’s make suggestions to them and even introduce them to these opportunities to stay engaged. A disabled homebound elder may be able to make phone calls to other homebound elders and brighten a day for both.

Another opportunity to stay engaged and bring interest into your day is through the Meal Sites (free or low cost meals). For the homebound, “Meals on Wheels” can provide a daily brief contact. For a list of available sites, call your local Area Office on Aging 800-510-2020.

Other ideas to stay engaged are: “Pet therapy” (the unconditional love of a pet), art therapy, volunteering as a friendly visitor or hiring a personal assistant to engage in social endeavors if the elder is isolated and can no longer drive.

This most recent research separated “loneliness” from “depression”. However, those who are lonely or have a sense of loneliness can look for “peer counselors” or find a therapist who works with seniors (often Medicare will pay some of this cost). The peer counselor or therapist could coach the elder on finding where they would best fit in staying engaged. I had a client who,

until she was 90 and got very ill, volunteered in a “thrift shop” – her task was sitting and pricing all the jewelry and she became very good at it. It was a suggestion I made to her 15 years prior to her death and she said that this one activity, once a week, gave her purpose.

As a Family Therapist and Care Manager for the past 30 years, I have seen that loneliness is not only because of lack of mobility or isolation from family or friends, but may be due to a life-long Mental Health issue or part of a progressive illness such as Alzheimer’s. Often people with dementia begin to pull in and refuse invitations to any social activities. This is when families should seek professional assistance to find or create appropriate opportunities for social engagement in a limited and safe manner. Care Managers are great resources for families.

We all feel lonely at times. The good news is we can do something about this to enrich the lives and health of elders as well as ourselves.

The lesson for each of us is to stay engaged – and especially to give back. In the end, that giving will be your own better health and your legacy of generosity. What could be better?

Eldercare Services provides Counseling, Support Groups, Home Care and Care Management to aid Family Caregivers. If you or someone you know could benefit from time off or self-care, give us a call at (866) 760-1808 or email us at Info@EldercareAnswers.com.



Eldercare Services works with Seniors and their families in Walnut Creek, Alameda County, San Francisco, Marin County and the Tri-Valley, CA.

Visit us on the web at www.EldercareAnswers.com for more information.

Community Classes

Walnut Creek

What You Wanted to Know About Dementia But Were Afraid to Ask

3rd Friday of every month from 10 AM to Noon

1808 Tice Valley Blvd., Walnut Creek, CA 94595

Cost for Classes: None

Class Registration:

Please call at least 3 days ahead

For more information regarding classes and support groups, visit us at www.EldercareAnswers.com or call (925) 937-2018 or email us at Info@EldercareAnswers.com

Support Groups

When concerns for aging family members are part of every day life, or when they interfere with work, your health or other relationships, you need to join a support group.

Caring for An Aging Family Member

2nd Thursday of every month from 7 to 8:30 PM

1808 Tice Valley Blvd., Walnut Creek, CA 94595

1st Tuesday of every month from 6 to 7:30 PM

605 A Chenery St., San Francisco, CA 94131

Cost for Support Groups: None

Support Group Registration: Not required

More Info: (925) 937-2018 or (415) 469-8300



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