

THINGS TO DO

Successful Aging: Finding solutions to loneliness and isolation in older Americans



Technology can help older adults stay connected with friends and loved ones.

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Dear readers,

Last week, we presented a quiz on myths about social isolation and loneliness in order to challenge some assumptions about older adults. This week we present a few initiatives to address the problem.

Let's first review a variety of factors affecting the ability of older adults to engage in the outside world. Liz Seegert of the Association of Health Care Journalists identifies some of those factors: Mobility problems, no longer being able to drive, living in rural areas and having limited transportation options.

Add to that being frail, experiencing ageism and having few, if any, opportunities to participate in a community. And then there is the problem of tight or fixed incomes and not speaking English.

The Public Policy & Aging Report published by the Gerontological Society of America recently devoted their issue to the "Lack of Social Connectedness (among older adults) and its Consequences."

Here are programs they reference:

The telephone: The Motion Picture & Television Fund (MPTF) in Woodland Hills launched a Daily Call Sheet. This project is designed to increase healthy social connections and form a broader community that establishes sustainable social interventions. A team of volunteers makes daily social telephone calls to older adults who are at risk of being isolated. It's available to active industry members, retirees and parents of industry members. The MPTF, with about 35,000 members over the age of 60 years, has formed a coalition for the greater Los Angeles area of 20 agencies to develop collective strategies and sustainable programs and services to prevent isolation.

Technology: Technology serves as a valued connector and at the same time a source that increases alienation and isolation among older adults, according to Thomas Kamber, executive director of Older Adults Technology Services (OATS). Kamber cites some surprising statistics. One-third of Americans over age 65 report they never use the Internet; half lack broadband connections. That translates to more than 15 million older adults who cannot use email, follow family members on Facebook or search for local events and activities. Kamber used this evidence of need in launching OATS, designed to train older adults on technology who had little or no experience with computers. Thousands signed up at senior centers across New York City. A study by the New York Academy of Medicine found that 65 percent of participants not only learned to use the computer; they also reported more social engagement six months after the computer class.

The Village movement: With over 60 Villages in California, this grassroots membership movement is designed to help older adults age in place and stay connected to their communities – by getting a ride to a book group, participating in a lecture series, joining a knitting group or enjoying a vodka-tasting party. Director Beatarice Kirkman of the REALconnections Village says, “Strong relationships among Village members and volunteers are emphasized. These relationships often serve as extended family and help prevent our members from being socially isolated.” REALconnections serves residents of Alta Loma, Claremont, La Verne, Pomona, Rancho Cucamonga, San Dimas and Upland. For more information, try (909) 621-6300 or www.realconnections.org.

Our role as individuals: We may not be able to address isolation such as improving transportation or access to resources. However, we each can play a role in combating the feeling of loneliness. Technology is wonderful, but not a substitute for a smile or hug. Personal notes are still appreciated. It takes so little time to write a note to say, “I am thinking of you.” Many of us already are reaching out – to give someone a ride, take chicken soup to an ill friend or being available to visit. All this takes is some awareness, a little time and caring. Many agencies and religious institutions are doing just that. However, that’s not quite enough. How wonderful our world would be if each of us extended a warm outreach to an older adult just once or twice a week.

So let us all be vigilant and try to do our part. (Note: See the [Purposeful Aging LA initiative](http://empowerla.org) designed to create an age friendly city at empowerla.org).

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By Fannie Mae



If you have 3% down, you may qualify to own a home. Yes, that means more room for her dance shoes and his climbing gear.



Helen Dennis

Helen Dennis is a nationally recognized leader on issues of aging, employment and retirement with academic, corporate and nonprofit experience. She has received awards for her university teaching at USC's Davis School, Andrus Gerontology Center and for her contributions to the field of aging, the community and literary arts. She has edited two books and written more than 100 articles and has frequent speaking engagements. She is the weekly columnist on Successful Aging for the Southern California Newspaper Group, and has assisted more than 15,000 employees in preparation for the non-financial aspects of retirement. In her volunteer life, she has served as president of five nonprofit organizations. Fully engaged in the field of aging, she was a delegate to a White House Conference on Aging and is co-author of the Los Angeles Times bestseller, "Project Renewment®: The First Retirement Model for Career Women." Helen has extensive experience with the media including Prime Time, NPR, network news, the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Sacramento Bee and Christian Science Monitor. She recently has been recognized by PBS Next Avenue as one of the 50 influencers in aging for 2016. For more information, visit www.HelenMDennis.com. Or, follow her on Facebook at www.facebook.com/SuccessfulAgingCommunity.

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