Social Isolation and Loneliness among Older Adults: Mitigating Health Outcomes

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Objectives

- Define *social isolation* and *loneliness*
- Examine prevalence of and risk factors for *social isolation* & *loneliness*
- Summarize findings pertaining to health outcomes
- Explore interventions to mitigate health outcomes

An Important Distinction

Social Isolation

"A **state** in which the individual lacks…engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts, and is deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships." (Nicholson, 2009, p. 1346)

Loneliness

"A **subjective experience** that is unpleasant and distressing and results from deficiencies in a person's social relationships." (Ciolfi, 2019, p. 25)
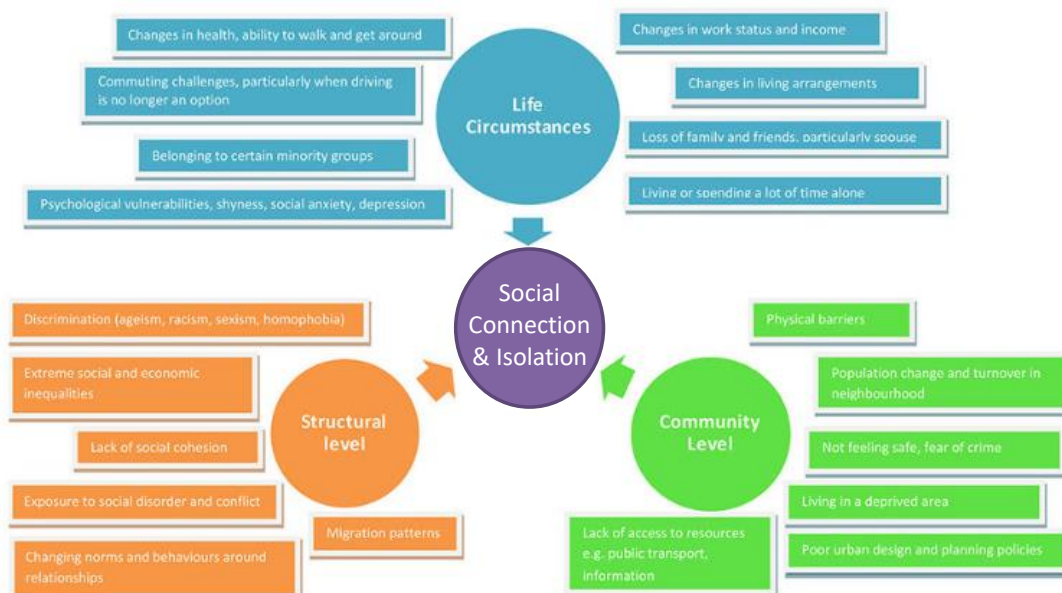

Figure 1 - Changes impacting on social connectedness

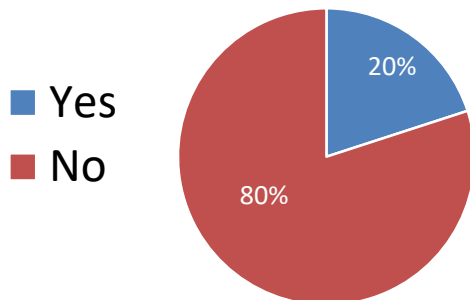http://www.healthyageingindudley.org.uk/social-connectedness.html

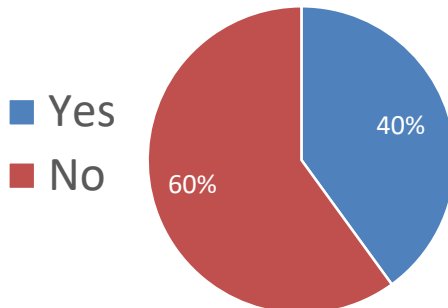"The most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was *loneliness*."

-Surgeon General Vivek Murthy (2014-17)

% of Americans who are lonely - 1980s

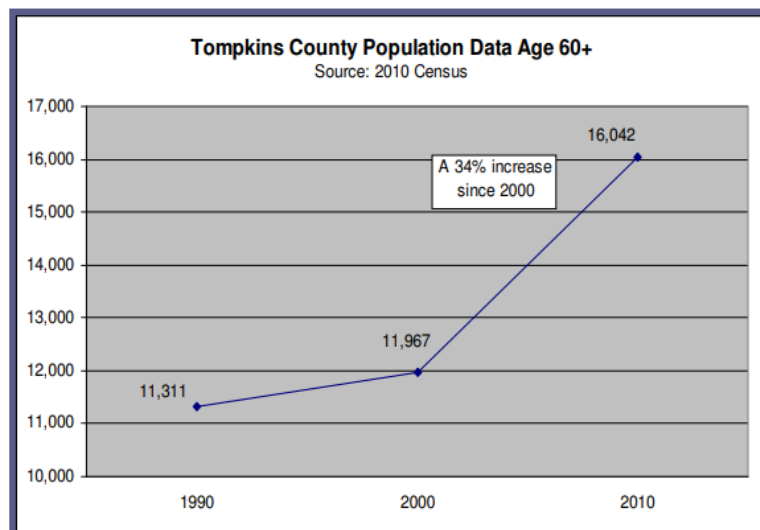% of Americans who are lonely - Today

■ Yes
■ No

20%

80%

■ Yes
■ No

40%

60%

(Brooks, 2018; Nicholson et al., 2010; Perissinotto, Cenzer, & Covinsky, 2012)

Risk Factors

- Geographically isolated
- LGBTQ+
- Physical, functional, sensory, cognitive impairment
- 80+
- Living alone
- Limited income
- Poor mental health
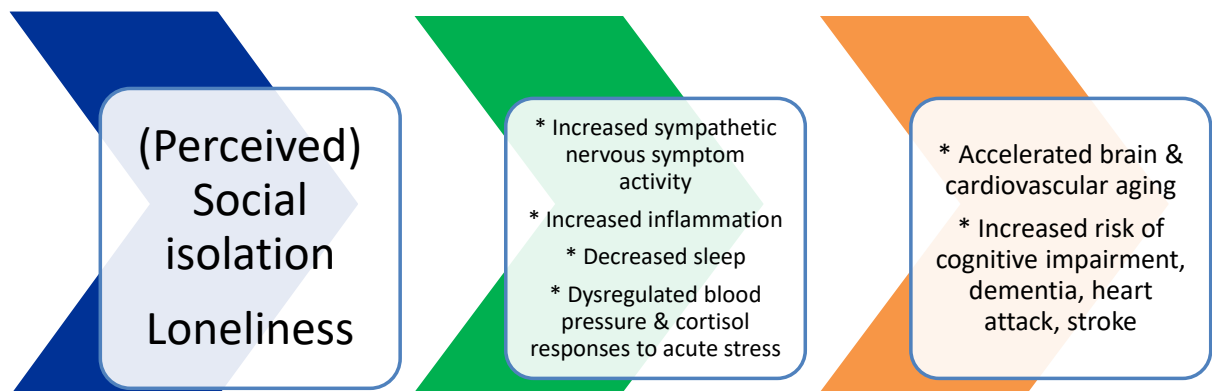- Life transitions
- Men

Tompkins County Population Data Age 60+
Source: 2010 Census

A 34% increase since 2000

16,042

11,967

11,311

1990   2000   2010

Source: Age Friendly Ithaca and Tompkins County Action Plan, December 2016

Pathways of Health Promotion

- Increases sense of belonging, identity, & purpose
- Improves self-confidence & sense of self-worth
- Provides material support or increasing knowledge about how to access material needs and services
- Encourages us to change or avoid unhealthy lifestyle habits
- Provides social support that enables us to cope with trauma and stress

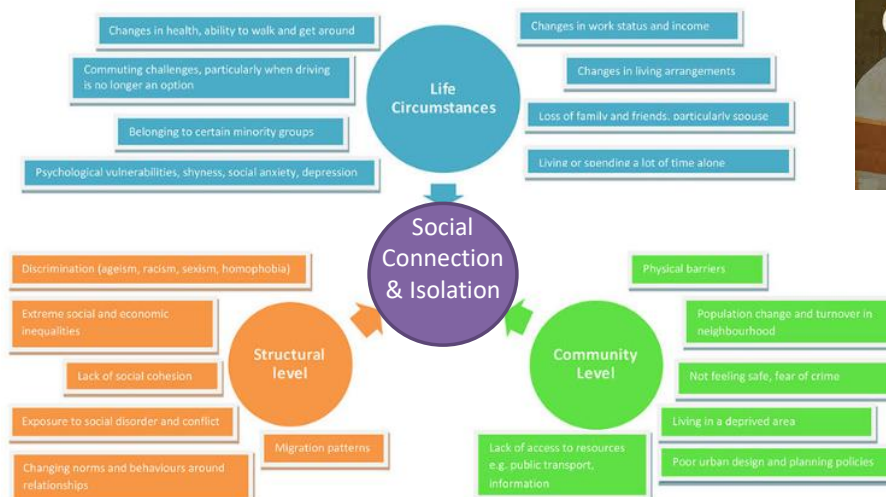(Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Reiner, 2019)

(Perceived) Social isolation Loneliness	* Increased sympathetic nervous symptom activity * Increased inflammation * Decreased sleep * Dysregulated blood pressure & cortisol responses to acute stress	* Accelerated brain & cardiovascular aging * Increased risk of cognitive impairment, dementia, heart attack, stroke

(Cacioppa et al., 2011; Grant, Hamer, & Steptoe, 2009; Pillemer & Holtzer, 2015)

Loneliness and social isolation may be hazardous to your health.

Flegal et al, 2013; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Yang et al., 2016

Mitigating Health Outcomes: A Prescription for Well-Being

Figure 1 - Changes impacting on social connectedness

(Nicholson, 2012; http://www.healthyageingindudley.org.uk/social-connectedness.html)

A Prescription for Well-Being

- Physical activity & wellness programs
  - Social contact with others
  - Reframe
  - Never too late!
  - Prevention

(Gugliucci et al., 2019)

A Prescription for Well-Being

- Animal companionship
  - Reduces loneliness (Johnson & Bibbo, 2015; Stanley et al., 2014)
  - Decreases stress and anxiety (Friedmann et al., 2015)
  - Physical activity & health behaviors (Curl et al., 2017)
  - Present orientation (Raina et al., 1999)
  - Support exchange/purpose (Fine & Friedmann, 2019)
  - Social capital (Wood, 2011; Arkow, 2015)

Cats for Comfort

Cornell Feline Health Center

A Prescription for Well-Being

- Technology
  - Email, social media, internet
  - Mixed findings
  - Technology training

- Spirituality/Religion
  - Coping, mutual support, meaning
  - Social events

A Prescription for Well-Being

- Volunteerism & Civic Participation
  - 2 billion hours/year; $45 billion economic value/year (CNCS, 2016).
  - Practitioner strategies for encouraging volunteerism:
    - Make "the Ask"
    - Connect with formal programs & leverage informal networks
    - Focus on strengths
    - Remove institutional barriers

A Prescription for Well-Being

- Age-Friendly Communities
  - "…promotes active, healthy, socially connected aging through inclusive policies, infrastructure, & services" (Oh, 2019)

A Prescription for Well-Being

- Neighborhood café/senior center hybrid
  - Breakfast, lunch, snacks
  - Daily activities (e.g., yoga, art, exercise)
  - Cultural programming and trips
  - Telephone topics
  - Lifestyle tips via FB, Twitter, email

A Prescription for Well-Being

- The Village Model (Graham, Scharlach, & Stark, 2017)

LOVE LIVING AT HOME

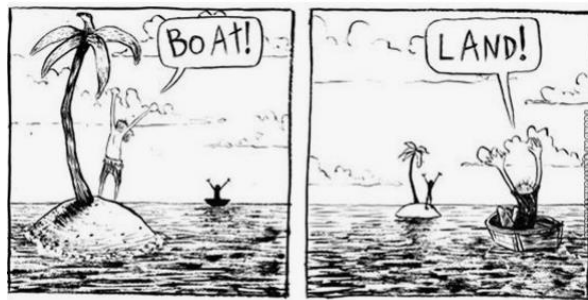- Intentional Intergenerational Communities (Power et al., 2008)

Bridge Meadows

NEW AVENUES for Youth

A Prescription for Well-Being

- If it is (at least in part) about perceptions and subjective experience…

A Prescription for Well-Being

- Take a broad view of assessment
  - Risk factors
  - Characteristics of social network
  - Quality of social interactions
  - Types of social support

Conclusions

- Social isolation and loneliness don't always mean the same thing.
- Prevention and early intervention are important
- Intervention must occur at individual, community, and structural levels.
- Remember the importance of our "social portfolio" (Cohen, 2000)
- New professional roles, knowledge, skills, as well as cross-sector collaboration required to meet the social needs of the older population and to promote their optimal well-being.

Thank You!

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