Social Loneliness and Isolation Among Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

The need to practice social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic amplified issues concerning peoples' ability to shelter in place; shelter practices; and the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences for people experiencing unsheltered and sheltered homelessness. One significant cause for concern was the effect of social loneliness and isolation on the well-being of people experiencing homelessness. According to a resource addressing the loneliness of social distancing for people experiencing homelessness, the loneliness experienced through isolation can seriously impact one's physical, mental, and emotional health. Understanding how social loneliness and isolation impact people who are unhoused or experiencing homelessness can help service providers, people experiencing unsheltered and sheltered homelessness, and the wider society better perceive and engage with one another.

Defining Social Loneliness and Isolation

A person experiencing social loneliness and isolation feels disconnected or isolated from social interactions and relationships due to a lack of meaningful connections with others and a sense of exclusion or alienation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that social loneliness and isolation increase health risks for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, dementia, suicidality, and self-harm. Factors contributing to social loneliness for people experiencing unsheltered and sheltered homelessness include not having permanent housing, community connections, or family relationships; experiencing consistent dehumanizing and unfair treatment based on housing status; and being feared, mistrusted, and shunned by society for, among other things, living with a substance use disorder or having a mental health diagnosis.
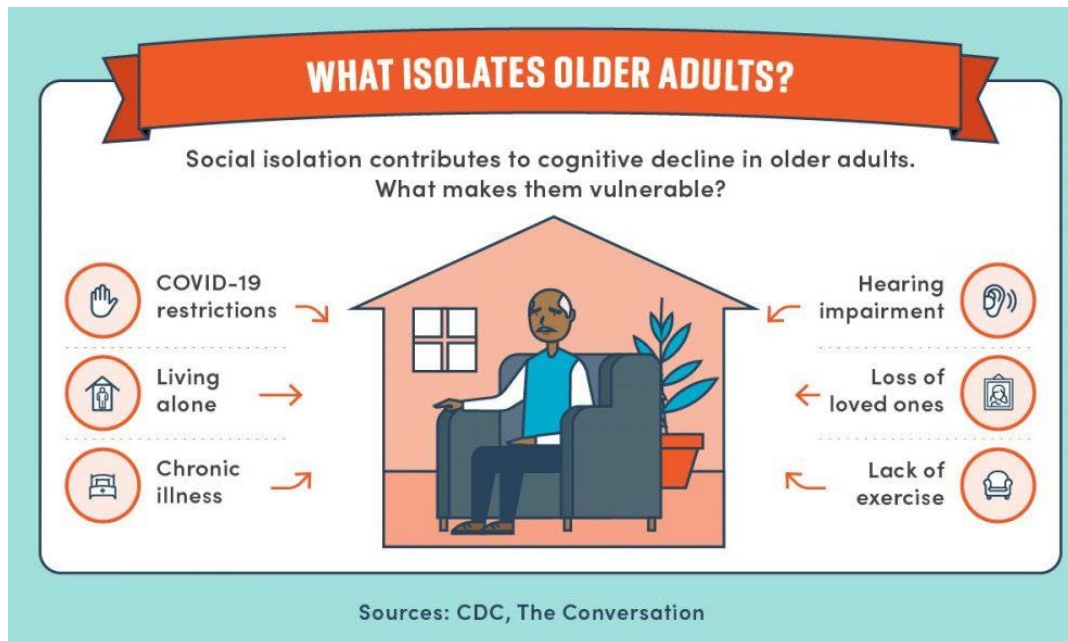
Key Factors Contributing to Social Loneliness and Housing Status

- Lack of stable housing and community ties.
- Stigma and social exclusion.
- Mental health challenges and substance use disorders.
- Demographic characteristics.

Social Loneliness and Homelessness

Homelessness often involves a loss or lack of appropriate stable housing, social support networks, and a sense of belonging within a community. People experiencing homelessness deal with stigma and face numerous challenges in establishing and maintaining social connections, which leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

As lifespans increase, economic challenges grow, and life changes affect housing options and stability, the elderly become more likely to not only experience loneliness and isolation but also homelessness. The longer we live, the smaller our circle of peers becomes. The aging of people experiencing chronic homelessness is also a concern. The elderly are expected to be one of the fastest-growing segments of people experiencing homelessness over the next decade, which has the potential to be a serious public health issue.

WHAT ISOLATES OLDER ADULTS?

Social isolation contributes to cognitive decline in older adults. What makes them vulnerable?

- COVID-19 restrictions
- Living alone
- Chronic illness
- Hearing impairment
- Loss of loved ones
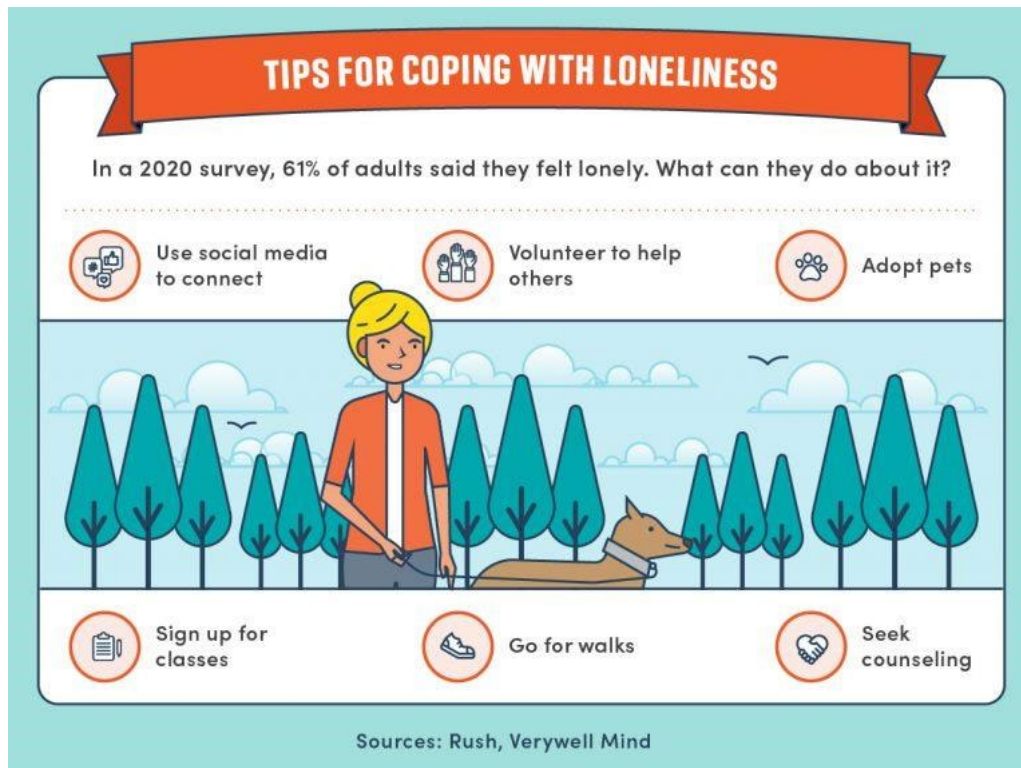- Lack of exercise

Sources: CDC, The Conversation

Social Loneliness, Isolation and Race

Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are more likely to experience social loneliness and isolation. According to the Cigna Group, 75 percent of Latinx/Hispanic and 68 percent of Black/African American adults are classified as lonely. Additionally, among people identified as BIPOC earning less than $50,000 and those receiving Medicaid benefitsare more likely to be classified as lonely.

Support Strategies (EASE)

- **E**xtend yourself by finding opportunities to volunteer in your community and connect or reconnect with family and friends in person or through social media.

- **A**ction plan. Make a plan for what you would like to do and how you will address barriers along the way. Speak with a counselor or mental health professional.

- **S**eek collectives or groups to connect to. Find others who share your interests.

- **E**xpect the best. Maintaining a positive outlook can counteract the negative mental effects of loneliness.

Source: Dr. Cacioppo—EASE Into Social Connection

TIPS FOR COPING WITH LONELINESS

In a 2020 survey, 61% of adults said they felt lonely. What can they do about it?

- Use social media to connect
- Volunteer to help others
- Adopt pets
- Sign up for classes
- Go for walks
- Seek counseling

Sources: Rush, Verywell Mind

Personal Reflection - A Spirit Set Free

In the depths of darkness, I stood alone—A prisoner of fate, my spirit overthrown. Isolated, homeless, in social exile reside, but within my heart, a spark of hope would hide.

With every passing day, I found the strength to fight, Love and compassion my guiding light. In the prison of my mind, I dream of a day when victory would come, and despair would fade away.Through the cold and lonely nights, I'd persevere, each tear that fell, a testament to my fear. But I knew deep within, a fire burned so bright: A flame of conviction, to make everything right.I'd paint my dreams upon the prison walls, A mural of hope, where the heart never falls. Compassion for myself I'd learn to embrace, and love for my soul I'd never let it erase. For in the darkest hours, the "Spirit of God" would rise, A phoenix from the ashes reaching for the skies. With unwavering conviction, I would break free from me, No longer defined by my past, but by what could be. And when that day of victory finally came, the world would know my strength, my name, and no shame, for love, compassion, and conviction they'd see, His power had transformed me into the person I was meant to be. So remember, dear heart, when life feels unjust, In the face of all adversity, it is the peace within I will trust. In His love, compassion, and unwavering conviction, you'll find the victory that defies all life's restrictions.

—Don Gardner, A Formerly Homeless Social Loneliness and Isolation Survivor

Resources

[COVID-19-Homeless-System-Response-Social-Distancing-Inspired-Ideas-for-Addressing-Loneliness.pdf](#)

[CDC Emotional-wellbeing/social-connectedness/loneliness.htm](#)

[NYTimes.com/2020/09/30/magazine/homeless-seniors-elderly.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap](#)

[Understanding-homelessness/causes-intersections/stigma-social-isolation](#)

[Understanding-america-s-loneliness-crisis-who-is-lonely-and-how-we-can-help](#)

[Loneliness-epidemic-persists-post-pandemic-look](#)