

Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Dementia: Challenges and Solutions

Exploring the impact of social isolation and loneliness on seniors, particularly those with dementia, and their care partners, as well as highlighting strategies and programs like Memory Cafés that address these issues.

Introduction to Social Isolation & Loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are widely recognized as major mental health concerns. More recent studies have shown that physical isolation and loneliness can lead to much more physical health complications than previously thought. Dementia is associated with social isolation and loneliness in multiple ways. Not only do people with dementia have a predisposition to loneliness or social isolation but social isolation and loneliness have been shown to increase one's risk of dementia in otherwise healthy seniors.

Social isolation



Loneliness



Definitions and Types of Loneliness

While loneliness is often linked with social isolation, they don't always occur together. A person may feel lonely even if they are socially connected. In contrast, some may choose social isolation and not find it distressing. However, isolation still poses health risks, even if unrecognized by the individual.

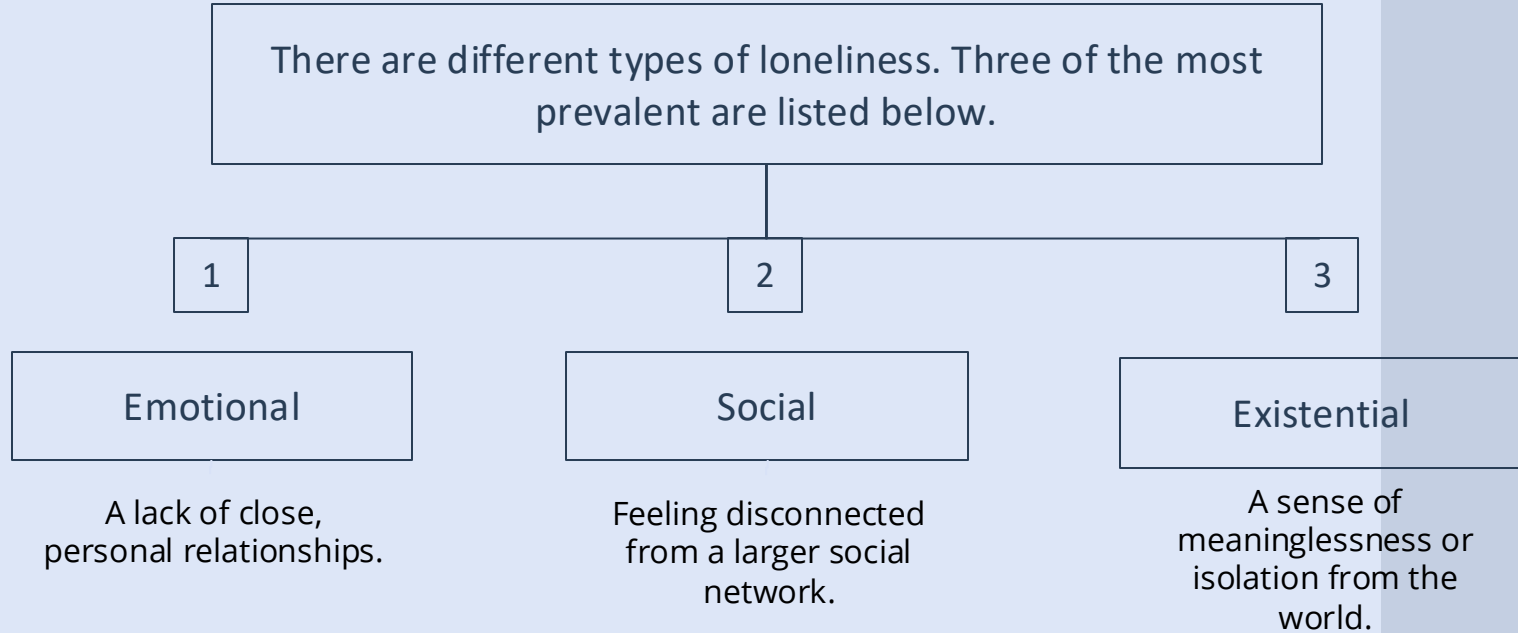


Social Isolation is an objective measure, referring to the lack of social interactions or relationships.



Loneliness, on the other hand, is a subjective, emotional feeling of disconnection or being alone.

Types of Loneliness



What Leads to an Increased Risk of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Seniors?

- living alone
- being age 80 or older
- having a compromised health status
- having multiple chronic health problems
- having no children or contact with family
- lacking access to transportation
- living with low-income
- changing family structures
- being left behind by younger people migrating for work
- location of residence
- experiencing critical life transitions such as retirement, death of a spouse, or losing a driver's license
- lacking awareness of or access to community services and programs
- being a caregiver

Why are People with Dementia at Greater Risk?

- ❑ People with dementia will often withdraw socially as their cognitive level declines.



Someone with dementia can find that certain things are becoming more difficult to do which can be frustrating. As an example, they might find it increasingly difficult to keep track of the progress of a conversation and have trouble expressing themselves. This can discourage a person with dementia from taking part in activities or conversations as much as they used to, or at all.



Someone with dementia may also find themselves to be distressed from overstimulation in certain environments, such as being in a noisy room with lots of people. People with dementia may also become more withdrawn over time as they socialize or communicate less.

The Facts About Social Isolation and Loneliness

About **30%** of Canadian seniors are at risk of becoming socially isolated. Reports by Statistics Canada estimate that between **19%** and **24%** of Canadians over age 65 feel isolated from others and wish they could participate in more social activities. (Canada, Employment and Social Development, 2024)

According to the United States Centres for Disease Control, loneliness and social isolation are associated with an increased risk of death of **26** percent and **29** percent, respectively. (Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health, n.d.)

Social isolation can put seniors at greater risk of health complications than obesity and physical inactivity. "One study has shown that a lack of social connections can increase one's chances of an early death to a similar degree to smoking **15** cigarettes a day". (Canada, Employment and Social Development, 2024)

Social isolation can increase a person's risk of dementia by about **60%** (Alzheimer's Society, n.d.)

Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Populations

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased the frequency of social isolation and loneliness for many, particularly for older adults. Restrictions on physical contact and social activities made it difficult for seniors to maintain connections, leading to increased health risks and a decline in overall well-being. Even since the restrictions have been lifted, many seniors still limit social interactions due to COVID-19.

One Canadian study has shown that in 2020, COVID-19 led to reported increased loneliness by 67% in women ages 65-74, 45% in men ages 65-74, 37% in women ages 75-84, and 33% in men ages 75-84.

(Wister et al., 2021)



The increases in loneliness across the entire population, especially seniors, were a major concern due to the increased health risks associated with social isolation and loneliness.



Several physicians within the Wolfville Collaborative Practice in Nova Scotia remarked a notable decrease in the general health of patients, especially seniors, since the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Memory Cafés – A Community Response



Memory Cafés were created to provide social opportunities for seniors with dementia and their care partners. These cafés adapted during the pandemic by moving to virtual formats, helping participants stay connected. The program highlights the importance of maintaining social engagement, even in the face of challenges.



Memory Cafés are a community-driven initiative designed to meet the needs of individuals with dementia and their care partners. They address many recommended interventions, such as social activity, skill development, and leisure opportunities, while also helping to foster a sense of belonging and support.



For those with dementia, communication becomes increasingly difficult as cognition declines. Memory Cafés are designed to help maintain social and emotional connections, even as verbal communication becomes more challenging. Memory Cafés include non-memory based activities, such as deciding which picture / painting the individual enjoys the most and listening to songs, and often live performances together. This allows individuals to socialize with other members of the cafés regardless of their health status. These cafés create a welcoming and inclusive environment for both individuals with dementia and their care partners to get together with other members of the community and enjoy a coffee or tea and a treat.

Interventions for Social Isolation and Loneliness

Effective interventions are personalized, considering the unique needs of each individual.

Successful approaches include:

- Cognitive behavioural therapy
- Social cognitive therapy
- Reminiscence therapy
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction



Social therapies include:

- One-to-one interventions (nurse or therapist home visits)
- Technology-assisted interventions (training in technology to communicate online)
- Group therapies (social gatherings such as memory cafés)



One study has shown that of the three social therapies listed above, group therapies were the most successful.

(Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2014)

Moving Forward

- By encouraging meaningful interactions and offering a supportive and inclusive environment, Memory Cafés help individuals maintain social and emotional connections, even as challenges arise. Come and join us for an uplifting experience where community and companionship thrive!
- In effort to reach as many people as possible, there are now 13 different Memory Café locations across Nova Scotia: Wolfville/Kentville Cape Breton Argyle Lunenburg Bridgewater Chester Shelburne Cole Harbour Tantallon New Minas Richmond Berwick Clare.
- More information, as well as instructions to sign up for your local Memory Café can be found on our website: <https://memorycafens.ca/>.



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