Loneliness in Seniors

The loneliness epidemic is now known to be a major public health issue, impacting both mental and physical health. But there are ways to protect ourselves. Angela Mathews explains.

After a lifetime spent caring for the poorest of the poor and looking after people suffering from sicknesses diverse as leprosy, tuberculosis, cholera and HIV/AIDS Mother Teresa famously said, “Of all the diseases I have known, loneliness is the worst”.

Several decades later US Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, identified the “epidemic of loneliness’ as a public health issue. In 2023 he described mental health as the defining public health crisis of our time but identified loneliness as being at the heart of that crisis (Murthy 2023).

Loneliness is the state of distress or discomfort which results from the perceived gap between one’s desire for social connection, and their experiences of social connection. (Psychologytoday.com. 2025). While loneliness can affect anyone, those aged 65 and over are particularly vulnerable. In fact the General Social Survey carried out by Statistics NZ showed the percentage of people aged 65 had over who felt only increased form 27% in 2018 to 36% in 2021, a massive 9% increase in only three years!

In November 2024, Age Concern Auckland, in conjunction with the CHT Aged Care Fund, published a report examining loneliness and social isolation among older adults in Auckland and the Bay of Plenty. Their research found that 59% of participants had recently felt lonely or socially isolated, and 30% felt that way often or all for the time (Breaking Barriers: Understanding the Socal Connection Challenges of Older Adults, Age Concern Auckland).

Among the report’s findings were some surprising insights. For example, 63% of those who reported feeling lonely could still drive, proving that it is not so much your driving status which is important but rather having a meaningful destination to drive to where you can meet others and connect over common in interests. And 42% of married older adults reported feeling lonely or isolated, showing that marriage alone is not a protection against loneliness.

The problem with loneliness is that it is not only diminishes joy and quality of life but also impacts physical health. Beyond the obvious correlation between loneliness and mental health challenges, it has also been linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes and a host of other health issues. Put simply, for the sake of your mental and physical health it is wise to do your utmost to come up with a plan to try and avoid loneliness and social isolation. This like many other things in life is more easily said than done. Whilst the 20th century saw rapid urbanisation in New Zealand, the 21st century has brought a new wave of globalisation for the New Zealand population. Over the last century people have become increasingly mobile which means families are less likely to live in the same town, city or even country. At the time of the 2023 census an estimated one million New Zealand citizens lived abroad, this represents an astonishing 19% of the population. That same census showed that over 28% of New Zealand’s resident population were born overseas. The result of all this mobility is an increasing number of older adults living in different countries or cities than their adult children, and their grandchildren. Visits have changed from regular pop-ins from children and grandchildren to catch ups online punctuated by occasional in-person visits.

The Age Concern study also highlighted that particularly in Auckland, there is a growing group of older migrants who feel isolated due to language barriers and their adult children being unable to support them during the day as they are out at work.

The Age Concern study found that the health system also contributed to the rise in loneliness and social isolation. Delays in accessing non-urgent medical treatment affected some participants mobility, making it harder for them to get out into the community and participate in activities and connect with others. This was especially true for those who were less financially secure as they didn’t have the option to pay for private medical care and extra support.

Ironically, while technology and social media have made us more connected than ever, many people feel more alone. Age Concern found that an astonishing 75% of survey participants who reported feeling lonely were social media users. However older New Zealanders are also rightly wary of scams which can make us feel insecure and hesitant about connecting online. I think we can all conclude after living through covid lockdowns, that nothing is quite as good as catching up in person and connecting over a cup of tea or shared interest.

So what can we do to protect ourselves from loneliness? The Age Concern study suggested that retirement planning needs to be more than financial but should also include a plan to live life with purpose and remain socially connected, whether that be through part time employment, volunteering or developing a new hobby. Of course retirement villages often come with a huge plethora of activities or clubs to get involved in which offer plenty of options to connect socially but for those people who aren't living in a village and whose social life was tied up with work there may be a need to plan ahead for your post-work social life!! If possible, make sure that plan doesn't hinge around one person or group but has lots of variety and options. As well as developing existing friendships this could include joining a new club or interest group. To find local clubs and groups in your area check out www.seniors.org.nz/clubs.

Lesley who lives in Christchurch found that her life was a bit more lonely when her husband moved into care. She said while it was easy to stay busy and connected during the day it was at the 'bookends' of the day, the mornings and evenings, that she really noticed the change. One thing she really missed was having someone to discuss problems with so she didn't feel like she was carrying the load alone, and it was at these times she really appreciated being connected to the community around her and having neighbours and friends to talk things through with over a cup of tea or a glass of wine. Fortunately Lesley is someone who has spent years helping others out in the neighbourhood so those community connections were already well established when she needed them.

Vivek Murthy, the US Surgeon General who identified the epidemic of loneliness, would agree with Lesley's approach. He encourages us to focus on building caring and supportive relationships and community networks to strengthen our social connections. He also encourages each person to take 15 minutes a day to reach to someone and to support them in some way, in doing so we forge a connection with another human and we remind ourselves of our own value. What a great way to reduce loneliness!!

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