



Could you be isolated and alone some day?

Preventing elder isolation - for yourself and others

Sometimes our days can get so harried, we long for just a few minutes of solitude. At what point, though, does an occasional break from the world turn into a pattern of isolation - a condition that may eventually find you alone, lonely and possibly at risk?

The seeds of isolation are often planted in middle age. That's the point when we are faced with changes in family, especially as children leave the nest. For decades, your status as a parent may have controlled your social life with PTA meetings, sporting events and ballet competitions. Many of these social commitments may seem exhausting and when children move out, there's often a sigh of relief. Finally, you have your evenings or weekends to yourself!

But more often than not, those social relationships are not replaced. Spending time alone may soon become a habit and a preference - it's just a lot easier than making the effort to establish new connections. Couple that with the possible loss of a spouse through divorce or death, and your own parents moving into assisted living or passing away. Thus begins a pattern characterized by single-serving dinners eaten alone by the light of the TV.

Sociologists believe that it's important to maintain social connections or form new ones, especially at times of transition. Robert Putnam, in his bestselling book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, discusses how critical building and maintaining "social capital" throughout our lives is for the well-being of individuals and our society. It enhances our children's education and welfare, ensures greater safety of our neighborhoods, promotes economic prosperity, improves political discourse, and even benefits our own health.

Social isolation also brings a greater risk of depression, heart disease, anxiety and other chronic conditions. The first step to preventing isolation as an elder is to nurture social connectedness in your middle years. Seeking new social groups, signing up for community education classes and volunteering for your favorite cause will help prevent the negative outcomes that often come with isolation - outcomes that may be irreversible later in life.

Little Brothers - Friends of the Elderly has provided one-on-one companionship services, advocacy and social activities for isolated and lonely older adults in the Twin Cities since 1972. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, LBFE has been recognized by the Charities Review Council for meeting its 27 Accountability Standards. More information about LBFE can be found at littlebrothersmn.org.

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