



Social connections reduce the risk of elder self-neglect

When Sally recently arrived in town to visit her 83-year-old sister Marie, she was appalled at what she found. Marie's normally pristine apartment was now cluttered with newspapers and unpaid bills; her clothes were caked with food and it was obvious to Sally that her dear sister was in need of a bath.

Self-neglect among older persons is more common than many of us may think. In fact, in some states, it accounts for more than half of the cases reported to adult protection services. Elder self-neglect is the inability to care for oneself and can include failing to eat or drink fluids in an adequate amount, to dress properly for the season, to take necessary medications and to follow basic hygiene practices.

Sadly, studies show that self-neglect makes people vulnerable to health problems and increases the risk of premature death. According to a study by Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, elders who don't care for themselves are six times more likely to die within a year.

A significant reason for self-neglect is the breakdown of a social network that often accompanies aging.* For example, when an elder's spouse dies, children move out of town, or they feel their public status is diminished due to retirement, the elder may lose an important frame of reference and social identity. For some, this can lead to lower self-esteem and reduced coping skills.



“When folks experience a loss of a loved one or an age-related transition, they may be inclined to isolate themselves,” said Sandy O’Donnell, Director of Program Services for the Minneapolis/St. Paul Chapter of Little Brothers - Friends of the Elderly. “However, what is really needed is for them to be brought into a caring community.”

LBFE plays a key role in helping elders without social networks stay connected, helping to prevent the isolation that can lead to self-neglect. Our staff and volunteers can also identify if elders are not making good decisions about their own care; in

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these instances, LBFE can provide greater assistance through one-on-one support and advocacy or will advocate for protective services.

“As the aging population increases, it’s more critical than ever that we understand the risks of elder self-neglect and its implications,” said Sandy. “Consider taking the time to invite

older family members, friends and neighbors to engage with you and your family in everyday life. The rewards for your efforts will be immeasurable!”

*Source: *Self-Neglecting Elders: A Clinical Dilemma* by Eloise Rathbone-McCuan and Dorothy Fabian, Auburn House Publishing Co., 1992

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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