

# Senior Friendly 7



## SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT



**REGIONAL GERIATRIC  
PROGRAM OF TORONTO**

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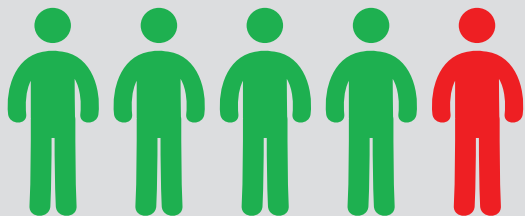
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# Understanding loneliness and social engagement

## Loneliness

A disconnect between a person's desired and actual social relationships, which results in a complex emotional and physical response.<sup>[7]</sup>

We have all felt lonely at times, but it becomes a problem when it occurs frequently or even chronically, negatively impacting health and functioning.



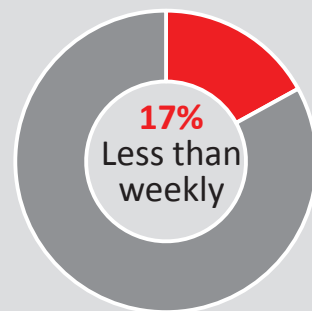
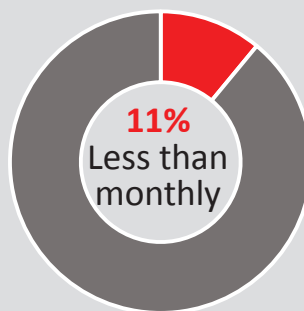
**One in five** Canadians, mainly older adults, **experience some degree of loneliness**. In those **over 85** years, the rate of loneliness is as high as **25%**.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Social Isolation

Results from situations where a person has few people to interact with.

Although closely related, loneliness and social isolation are not the same. A person can be socially isolated but not feel lonely, whereas an individual with a seemingly large social network can still experience loneliness. Individuals may be lonely in a crowd or socially contented while alone.

**How often do older adults have contact with family, friends, or neighbours?**<sup>[2]</sup>



## Social engagement

Involvement in meaningful activities with others and maintaining close, fulfilling relationships.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Social engagement can lessen loneliness.**





# The potential impact of loneliness and social isolation

## Can affect physical health

- Early mortality
- Stroke
- Elevated blood pressure
- Malnutrition

## Can affect mental health

- Depression
- Risk of suicide
- Substance misuse

## Can cause functional decline

- Physical and/or cognitive deterioration



## Risk factors for social isolation



**Psychological**  
Personality or  
mental health  
issues



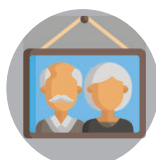
**Living alone**  
Widowhood,  
divorce or never  
married



**Health status**  
Health problems,  
physical challenges  
or disability



**Sensory  
Impairment**  
Chronic or  
recent changes




**No children**



**Major life events**  
Loss and  
bereavement,  
change in living  
arrangements

**Social isolation has a similar impact on mortality as smoking and alcohol misuse. It exceeds the risk associated with obesity and inactivity.<sup>[6]</sup>**

# Assessing loneliness



Older adults who experience loneliness may be less likely to visit a primary care provider, and may avoid talking about loneliness with others.

Here are questions you can ask to explore loneliness. The Three-Item Loneliness Scale is a simple, validated assessment for loneliness. It can be used by any care provider.

## The Three-Item Loneliness Scale<sup>[3]</sup>

These questions are about how you feel about different aspects of your life. For each question, answer how often you feel that way.

	Hardly Ever	Some of the Time	Often
How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	1	2	3
How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3
How often do you feel isolated from others?	1	2	3

*The Score: the sum of all items.*

*Score range: 3-9. Higher scores indicate greater loneliness.*

Adapted from: "A Short Scale for Measuring Loneliness in Large Surveys: Results from Two Population-Based Studies" by Hughes ME, Waite LJ, Hawkley LC, Cacioppo JT, 2004. Research on Aging.26(6):655-72.<sup>[3]</sup>



# Social engagement for older adults + family

**Think inside and outside of the home - how can you increase your social engagement?**

There are different types of social opportunities. It is important to find out what works best for YOU based on your interests and preferences. Options may include:



**Group activities**



**Family interactions**



**Informal relationships**



**Programs via phone**



**Social media and online platforms**

To find activities in your community, visit: [www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community](http://www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community)

## Practical tips for families on social engagement

- When social engagement opportunities are regularly scheduled and controlled by the older adult, it offers reassuring predictability.
- Do not be hurt if your loved one prefers reminiscing with someone other than yourself.
- If desired, help your family member find ways to connect with friends.
- Conversation can be enhanced by:
  - Listening actively
  - Responding positively
  - Following-up actively
  - Allowing time for silence and reflection

**If you or your loved one have expressed the wish for more company, feel left out or isolated from life – share this information with a member of your circle of care (healthcare team).**

# Social engagement in home and community care



- Be alert to statements suggesting that the older adult wants more company, feels left out or feels isolated from life.
- Having an understanding of the older adult's social network, culture, and personality style can be helpful.
- If you suspect that an older adult is suffering from loneliness, consider using the Three-item Loneliness Scale (page 6 of this toolkit). A score of more than 6 suggests that the person is very socially isolated and needs more care and attention.



- Consider all visits a social engagement opportunity.
- Control and predictability improve the positive impact of visits on social engagement.
- Conversation can be enhanced by:
  - Starting with open-ended questions such as: "How are you doing today?"
  - Listening actively
  - Responding positively
  - Following-up actively
  - Allowing time for silence and reflection
- Reminiscence can be a healthy part of conversation. There are different types and [functions of reminiscence](#).
- Identify opportunities for the older person to connect with friends or family, or join social groups in the community, and offer assistance with these connections.



- Communicate concerns of loneliness within the circle of care (healthcare team).
- Consider the older adult's relationships and preferences before discussing with family members, and if appropriate, share information on ways to promote social engagement. See helpful tips in [Ways of Preventing Social Isolation Among Seniors](#) (Caring People Inc., 2017).

# Social engagement in primary care



- Be alert to statements suggesting that the older adult wants more company, feels left out or feels isolated from life.
- Having an understanding of the older adult's social network, culture, and personality style can be helpful.
- If you suspect that an older adult is suffering from loneliness, consider using the Three-item Loneliness Scale (page 6 of this toolkit). A score of more than 6 suggests that the person is very socially isolated and needs more care and attention.



- Consider writing a social prescription which may include things like:
  - Seniors active living centres
  - Community recreation centres
  - Libraries
  - Volunteering and community engagement
  - See [www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community](http://www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community) for more options
- Ensure that the older adult collaborates on the social prescription.
- For some older adults, medical appointments may be their main form of social engagement.
- Sometimes just talking and listening can offer therapeutic benefit.
- Persistent loneliness despite access to social opportunities may indicate the need for more specialized assessment and intervention.



- Communicate concerns about loneliness and recommendations within the circle of care (healthcare team).
- Consider the older adult's relationships and preferences before discussing with family members, and if appropriate, share information on ways to promote social engagement. See helpful tips in [Ways of Preventing Social Isolation Among Seniors](#) (Caring People Inc., 2017).



# Social engagement in hospital



- Consider whether social isolation was a risk factor that contributed to seeking hospital care.
- Having an understanding of the older adult's social network, culture, and personality style is important in making this assessment.
- If you suspect that an older adult is suffering from loneliness, consider using the Three-Item Loneliness Scale (page 6 of this toolkit). A score of more than 6 suggests that the person is very socially isolated and needs more care and attention.



- Consider writing a social prescription which may include things like:
  - Seniors active living centres
  - Community recreation centres
  - Libraries
  - Volunteering and community engagement
  - See [www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community](http://www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community) for more options
- Ensure that the older adult collaborates on the social prescription.
- Conversation can be enhanced by:
  - Starting with open-ended questions such as: "How are you doing today?"
  - Listening actively
  - Responding positively
  - Following-up actively
  - Allowing time for silence and reflection
- Reminiscence can be a healthy part of conversation. There are different types and [functions of reminiscence](#).



- Include concerns and recommendations related to loneliness in discharge plans.
- Consider the older adult's relationships and preferences before discussing with family members, and if appropriate, share information on ways to promote social engagement. See helpful tips in [Ways of Preventing Social Isolation Among Seniors](#) (Caring People Inc., 2017).

# Social engagement in long-term care



- Be alert to statements suggesting that the older adult wants more company, feels left out or feels isolated from life.
- Having an understanding of the older adult's social network, culture, and personality style is important in making this assessment.
- Assess whether physical or mental health issues such as incontinence, vision, hearing, or mobility are having an impact on the older adult's level of social engagement.
- If you suspect that an older adult is suffering from loneliness, consider using the Three-Item Loneliness Scale (page 6 of this toolkit). A score of more than 6 suggests that the person is very socially isolated and needs more care and attention.



- Consider writing a social prescription which may include things like:
  - Seniors active living centres
  - Community recreation centres
  - Libraries
  - Volunteering and community engagement
  - See [www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community](http://www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community) for more options.
- Ensure that the older adult collaborates on the social prescription.
- Conversation can be enhanced by:
  - Starting with open-ended questions such as: "How are you doing today?"
  - Listening actively
  - Responding positively
  - Following-up actively
  - Allowing time for silence and reflection
- Reminiscence can be a healthy part of conversation. There are different types and [functions of reminiscence](#).



- Communicate concerns and recommendations related to loneliness within the circle of care (healthcare team).
- Consider the older adult's relationships and preferences before discussing with family members, and if appropriate, share information on ways to promote social engagement. See helpful tips in [Ways of Preventing Social Isolation Among Seniors](#) (Caring People Inc., 2017).

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