



Among Canadian seniors, a social isolation epidemic

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It's likely we all know someone like Mrs. Carpenter (not her real name). She is an elderly widow. She lives in rural Eastern Ontario, and her family all lives in the United States. She has no car and no nearby public transit, and multiple medical problems. The program Meals on Wheels delivers meals several days a week, but not on weekends. While the work of such agencies is admirable and important, the fact remains that Mrs. Carpenter is still socially isolated. In academic terms, that means she suffers with reduced social networks and a lack of social contact.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Carpenter's situation is not unique. A 2012 Statistics Canada study found that 20% of seniors did not participate in weekly or even monthly activities. This is, or ought to be, a glaring cause for concern.

How it affects our seniors

Social isolation is not the sole domain of the elderly, but it is uniquely suited to old age. A 2013 study by Andrew Steptoe at University College, London (U.K.) found that financial and mobility limitations, along with the death of friends and family, contributed to the decrease of the number of social contacts among seniors. Statistics Canada predicts that between 2015 and 2021, the number of Canadians aged 65 and over will outnumber those 14 and under. That means fewer children and grandchildren to visit, let alone to help take care of aging loved ones.


There are serious health consequences to social isolation among the elderly, including earlier death. Indeed, Mr. Steptoe found that social isolation was associated with long-standing illnesses such as chronic lung disease, arthritis, impaired mobility and "depressive symptoms." As well, a 2012 study by professors at the University of California found that loneliness leads to a decline in the ability to carry out activities of daily living, as well as difficulty in achieving everyday tasks such as reaching for items in upper cupboards and stair climbing. In extreme cases, social isolation can also be deadly. A 2010 review of studies of social isolation concluded that social isolation is as strong a factor in early death as alcohol consumption and smoking more than 15 cigarettes a day.

If we want our aging loved ones to live longer, healthier lives, then living in community with them is more of a necessity than many of us might have realized. The good news is that there are relatively simple ways to bring seniors into that community.

Building a sense of community

Beacon Hill Village, for example, is a grassroots nonprofit community organization founded in Boston in 2002. It provides services for members aged 50 and over in their own homes and neighbourhoods. Beacon Hill is run by seniors for seniors and provides a range of supports and social activities. The concept has spread across the U.S., with 110 communities now operating across that country.

Here's another example: Jennifer Derwey, now a resident of Halifax, was a nine year-old living in a small Alaskan town, far from her extended family, when her teacher arranged a pen-pal program between her class and the local senior's home. For Jennifer the benefits transcended school. "The most important thing I learned was that my senior penpal was a whole person, with a whole history and a whole lifetime of experiences," she said.



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And another one: Four churches in southern Ontario have been offering monthly spaghetti dinners in their communities for over a year. One such dinner has been happening in Richmond Hill, Ont. at the McConaghy Seniors' Centre. Alice Mawhinney, a Richmond Hill resident, organizes these evenings with the goal of allowing "neighbours to get to know each other without cost being a limiting factor." The location was chosen to allow for easy access, as it is close to the centre of Richmond Hill and is accessible by public transit.

As these three examples show, building community is best done at the grassroots level. While it may take time and a little bit of money, it's not hard to achieve. Start with your neighbours and work from there. Build something new or say "yes" when asked to help build. Combatting social isolation is a task for all Canadians.

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