

Loneliness – A Silent Illness

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- Dr Jayashree Dasgupta

Understanding loneliness

A recent online survey by Agewell Foundation of 15,000 participants across 300 districts in India reported that 47.5% of elderly people reported being lonely. Loneliness is a sense of deep-rooted feeling of sadness or emptiness when you want to connect or be with someone, but cannot do so. We all feel lonely sometimes and are more likely to experience loneliness as we grow older. Loneliness is often accepted as being an inevitable part of ageing without realising the detrimental impact that it can have on physical and mental health. It is essential to identify when loneliness is having a negative impact on our lives and plan effective ways to overcome this.

Some facts about loneliness

- About 6% of the elderly population above 60 years live on their own without the support of friends or family (Longitudinal Ageing Study).
- People who are lonely are more likely to have difficulty managing daily activities, with nearly 60% risk of decline in ability to manage basic activities like bathing, toileting and feeding
- Loneliness is associated with a 40% increased risk of dementia
- Loneliness is associated with increased risk for mental health problems like depression and anxiety. In India, 77% elderly with depression report feeling lonely (as found by Grover and colleagues in 2019)
- Loss of social relationships and loneliness have been associated with a 29% increase in risk for heart disease and 32 % increase in risk of stroke (as per review by Valtorta and colleagues in 2016)
- Loneliness is also an independent risk factor associated with death (Rico-uribe and colleagues in 2018)

The example of Ms A

Ms A is a 73-year-old retired school teacher. She was an energetic person who enjoyed her work and socializing prior to retirement. Her husband died two years ago following a battle with cancer, and she has been living alone since then. She has arthritis but is able to manage all activities by herself. Her younger daughter lives nearby and visits whenever she can, while her elder daughter is settled in another city. Since the past one year, Ms A has been experiencing difficulty in walking due to increased pain. As a result, she has stopped going to the temple where she was a member of the ladies *kirtan group*. She has also stopped going

for morning walks with her friends and instead, prefers to do some exercise or yoga at home. She avoids going to the local market and relies on the door-to-door vegetable vendor for groceries. Previously an avid reader, Ms A has been experiencing difficulty with her vision, but hasn't mentioned this to her daughter yet. She feels her daughter has enough on her plate managing a full-time job and taking care of her family and in-laws. Ms A doesn't want to trouble her unnecessarily and keeps herself occupied watching TV serials. As a result of this, her sleep during the night is disturbed and she feels drowsy during the day. Her elder daughter notices that her mother is calling less frequently and seems quieter. She begins to wonder why her mother is trying to avoid her and raises this concern.

Learning from Ms A - Impact of Loneliness on physical and mental well-being

Ms A was an active and independent person prior to retirement. Her husband developed cancer and she became occupied caring for him until his demise. Within a couple of years, she has gone from being a busy school teacher to losing her spouse and living alone. Retirement, loss of a spouse and living alone are significant changes in her life that have reduced her social network leading to loneliness.

Although she continues to be independent, physical ailments, have further impacted her social interactions. By not going to the temple, avoiding walks with her friends or going to the local market, she is becoming more isolated. She is also reducing activities that were part of her daily routine which she would look forward to, further leading to a loss of motivation. Although, the TV has become her constant companion, this is not a substitute for social interaction. Interacting with people is essential for our psychological well-being and reduces loneliness by making us feel valued and loved. Ms A has become withdrawn by not talking to her daughter, and has stopped sharing her problems for fear of becoming a burden, indicating this has already started to impact her psychological well-being.

If this continues, Ms A will be at greater risk for depression, and may neglect her physical health leading to other complications. Already, she is delaying an eye check-up which could lead to further deterioration in her vision that will affect other daily activities. In the long run, this could impact her ability to live independently and her self-confidence.

How to recognise loneliness?

Common life events such as retirement, loss of a spouse and peers, or change in living environment can lead to feelings of isolation; and it is not always obvious when someone may be feeling lonely. Here are some signs to recognise loneliness:

- Becoming withdrawn or communicating less
- Changes in frequency of phone calls
- Avoiding going out and spending more time in one room
- Reduced motivation for activities previously enjoyed
- Difficulty following a routine
- Disturbed sleep
- Changes in appetite

Ways to overcome loneliness/help someone overcome loneliness

As we age, several life changes are inevitable, but there are things which can be done to overcome feeling lonely and minimize the detrimental impact that loneliness can have on mental and physical health. Whether you feel lonely, or notice the signs in someone you know, here are some things which you must do:

1. Remain socially connected
Social isolation is one of the most common reasons for loneliness and it is important to make efforts to remain socially connected as we age.
 - Plan for your retirement - Colleagues from work form a major part of our social network during years of service and retirement can lead to a void. Remaining in touch with former colleagues helps us feel connected with this part of our life.
 - Widen your social network – Only 5% elderly above age 60 are members of a social or community organisation. Getting involved local organisations, NGOs, voluntary groups or senior citizen clubs are a great way to build new friendships and do something for the community
 - Meet family/ friends – Try to meet regularly with family and friends. Spending time with loved ones is a source of joy and important for psychological well-being
 - Leverage technology to remain socially connected – It may not always be possible to physically meet with friends or relatives due to distance, lack of transportation or health issues. Keep in touch via phone/ video calls.
2. Get regular health checks
People who are lonely tend to neglect their physical health which increases risk for many illnesses including heart disease, stroke, depression and dementia.
 - Regular medical check-ups – if you have any medical condition continue with regular reviews to minimize future complications.
 - Do not neglect sensory deficits – loss of hearing and vision can make one feel lonelier and cut off from the world. Use of a hearing or visual aid can help reduce this.

- Mental health is important - Loneliness is associated with increased risk for anxiety and depression. If low mood is persistent or you continuously feel very anxious and it interferes with your daily routine, it is important to meet a mental health professional who can guide you further.
3. Focus on self-care
- Loneliness is associated with loss of motivation and decline in functional ability.
- Follow a routine – maintaining a routine provides structure to the day that allows daily activities to be incorporated in a planned manner. This provides a sense of control and purpose which is important.
 - Exercise regularly and sleep well – if possible, join a group or class which helps to keep you motivated
 - Eat a balanced diet – many older adults who live alone find it difficult to cook or buy groceries and do not get adequate nutrition.
 - Ask for support – If it is difficult to manage domestic chores/activities, request for help from friends/neighbours/relatives or get additional support for domestic chores.

Summary/Conclusion

The figure below describes the relationships between loneliness and negative impact on health and wellbeing. As we age, several life events such as retirement, loss of a spouse and peers, as well as deterioration in health may not be avoidable. These may lead to social isolation and loneliness. Although loneliness itself is not a disease, the harmful effect that it can have on physical and mental health is enormous. Loneliness often goes unnoticed by family, friends or the elderly themselves, and therefore it is essential to recognize when someone may be vulnerable to loneliness. Luckily, simple efforts like making attempts to remain socially engaged by increasing circle of friends, or speaking with family over phone/video calls, and practicing self-care can go a long way in changing the harmful course of this silent illness.

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