

# “Learning Together About Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults”

**Presentation to Summerville Family Health Team**

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**Presenter:**

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**CCSMH**

Canadian Coalition for  
Seniors' Mental Health

Connecting People, Ideas and Resources

**CCSMPA**

Coalition canadienne pour la  
santé mentale des personnes âgées

Rassembler les gens, les idées et les ressources



ccsmh

*The mission of the  
CCSMH is to promote  
the mental health of  
seniors by connecting  
people, ideas and  
resources.*



“

*Mental illness is not a normal part of aging. All seniors have the right and deserve to receive services and care that promotes their mental health and responds to their mental illness needs. The Canadian Coalition of Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH) is hard at work ensuring that seniors' mental health is recognized as a key Canadian health and wellness issue.*

”



# CCSMH Areas of Focus



- A 23-year history of an interprofessional coalition, working within the umbrella of the Canadian Association of Geriatric Psychiatry (CAGP).
- Collaborating with clinicians, academics and communities in various fields, conducting rigorous research, and staying at the forefront of emerging knowledge.
- Providing evidence-based and relevant **guidelines and education opportunities** that address the unique mental health needs of older adults.



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Social Isolation and Loneliness have emerged as key elements affecting the physical and mental well-being of older adults across Canada.

Research has **compared living with social isolation and loneliness to the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day.**

The implications of these issues extend beyond emotional well-being, impacting overall health outcomes, exacerbating chronic conditions and increasing the risk of mortality.





# Defining Social Isolation & Loneliness ... It's Complex

## Social Isolation

*"A measurable deficiency in the number of social relationships that a person has.*

*An "objective" deficit in connections to family, friends or the community."*

**Social Isolation can increase the risk of loneliness.**

**But more social contact does not automatically reduce loneliness.**

**The quality of social relations is also important, as well as how people feel about those connections.**

## Loneliness

*"An internal subjective experience; it is an unpleasant sensation felt when a person's social relationships are lacking in quality or quantity compared to what they desire.*

*A "subjective" assessment that social relationships are lacking."*

## Figure 4. Reasons why Older Adults are at Increased Risk of Experiencing Social Isolation



Source: National Seniors Council, *Who's at risk and what can be done about it? A review of the literature on the social isolation of different groups of seniors*, February 2017.

# Some Examples of Life Transitions

A word cloud of life transitions. The word 'widowhood' is the largest and most central. Other words are arranged around it in various sizes and colors. The words include: 'retirement' (pink), 'divorce' (pink, vertical), 'hearing loss' (red), 'loss of vision' (brown), 'limited mobility' (blue), 'moving' (yellow, vertical), 'living alone' (green), 'change in residence' (yellow), 'loss of friends or family' (blue), and 'death of friends' (red).

loss of vision      limited mobility

retirement

moving      widowhood      divorce

living alone      hearing loss

change in residence

loss of friends or family

death of friends



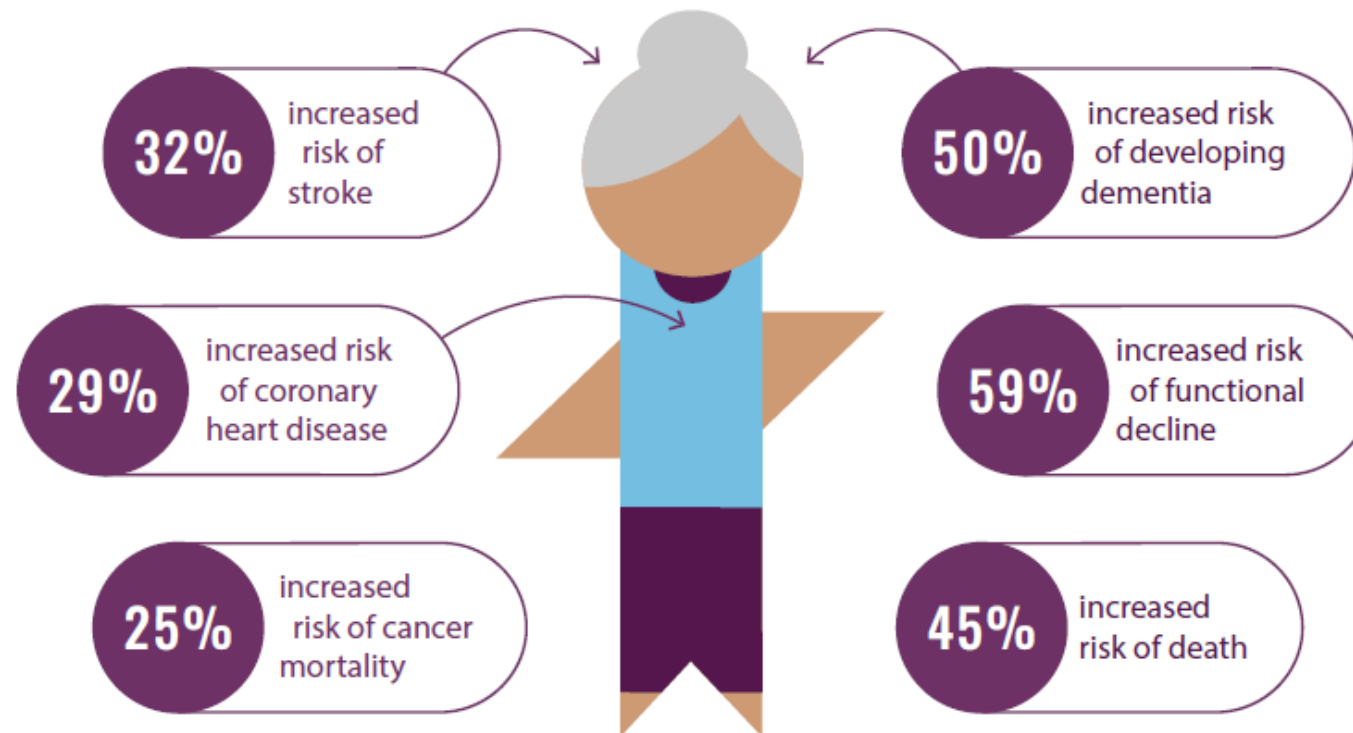
We can all feel lonely sometimes. But prolonged and /or intense experiences of loneliness can have negative impacts on our health and wellbeing.



**Figure 6: What are the Consequences of Social Isolation and Loneliness for Older Adults?**

## Isolation and Loneliness Affect the Body, Too

When older adults are socially isolated, their mental and physical health decline. Isolation and loneliness have been associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Here's how other types of risk increase for adults over 50 who aren't staying connected:



# What About Solitude?

- Increased empathy
- Increased productivity
- Sparks creativity
- Builds mental strength
- Opportunity to plan your life
- Good for children
- Helps you know yourself

FORBES > LEADERSHIP > CAREERS

## 7 Science-Backed Reasons You Should Spend More Time Alone

**Amy Morin** Former Contributor ①

*Psychotherapist and international bestselling mental strength author*



# Role of Health Care and Social Service Professionals



*Social Isolation and loneliness are rarely listed on a death certificates, yet they may be contributed to the excess deaths from all causes observed during the pandemic. Although the health sector cannot solve this problem alone, the medical community does need to respond.*

*Clinicians will require adequate training, resources, and support to integrate screening, interventions and referrals for social isolation and loneliness into their existing responsibilities. Patient's lives may hang in the balance.*



(Julienne Holt Lunstead, New England Journal of Medicine, 2023)



# The Opportunity

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## Strengthening the Relationship Between Older Adults and Health Care Providers



“Family physicians and other primary care providers might be the only point of social contact for many older patients ... [J]ust as physicians screen for other risk factors, there might be **a role for primary care physicians to identify patients who are isolated, lonely, or socially vulnerable** and to recommend evidence-based interventions that could strengthen social connection”  
*(Freedman and Nicolle, 2020)<sup>4</sup>*





# Older Adult Survey

- Facilitated a national survey asking adults 65 years plus about their experiences with social isolation and loneliness and their health.
- More than 1,800 responded.



# Key insights

- Older adults say they are knowledgeable about social isolation and loneliness and the negative AND mental physical health impacts
- More than half of older adults said they were comfortable talking to their HCSSPs about social isolation and loneliness...

**BUT** half said they were not.



# But not everyone is comfortable talking with their care provider about social isolation & loneliness

- About one in five respondents said they were somewhat comfortable (12%) or not comfortable (8.8%) talking to their provider
- We asked respondents who were not comfortable talking to their provider about social isolation and loneliness to identify their main reason from a list.
- These were the top 5 reasons:
  - I would be **embarrassed** (44%)
  - My provider **does not have enough time** (38%)
  - I am only allowed **one issue per appointment** (27%)
  - I do not think it is their **role** (20%)
  - It is **not important enough** to concern me (18%)



# Older adults identified a number of options that care providers could use to make them more comfortable

From a list respondents identified these top three options care providers could offer to help make respondents **more comfortable** talking to them about social isolation & loneliness.

- Provide me with some **resources** (57%)
- Connect me to **community programs and supports** (51%)
- Suggest **activities** that might help (44%)





# Older adults participate in a range of activities that help if they feel socially isolated or lonely

From a list of activities and actions they do or could do if they were feeling socially isolated or lonely, these were the respondents' top choices

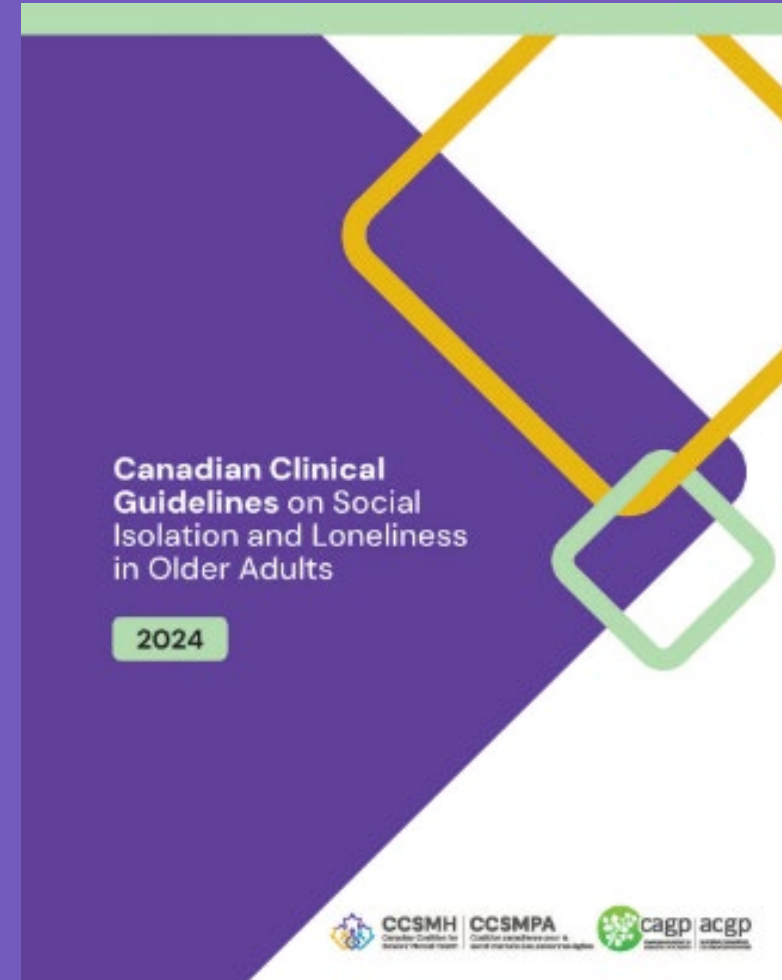
- Spending time **in person with friends and family** (79%)
- **Exercising** or taking part in exercise classes (62%)
- Using **technology** to connect with friends and family (58%)
- Spending time in **nature** (55%)





# CCSMH Social Isolation and Loneliness Clinical Guidelines Project

- Research and development of evidence-based clinical guidelines on social isolation and loneliness in older adults for Healthcare and Social Service Professionals (HCSSPs).
- To our knowledge the first in the world.
- 2-year project funded by Waltons Trust.



# What can you do if you're feeling lonely?

- Social activity
- Physical activity



# What can you do if you're feeling lonely?

- Psychological Therapies
- Social Prescribing



# What can you do if you're feeling lonely?

- Animal-Assisted Therapies
- Pet Ownership





# What can you do if you're feeling lonely?

- Leisure Skill Development
- Leisure Activities



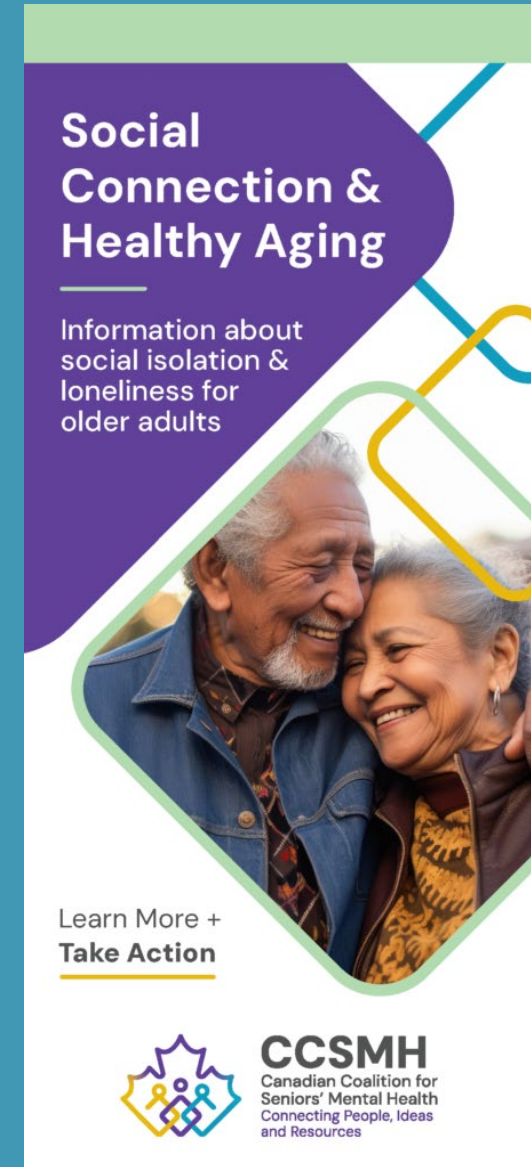


# What can you do if you're feeling lonely?

- Do what works for you.
- Be creative!



# We've got resources!



*“Not everything that is faced can be changed,  
but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”*

James Baldwin Activist (1924-1987)

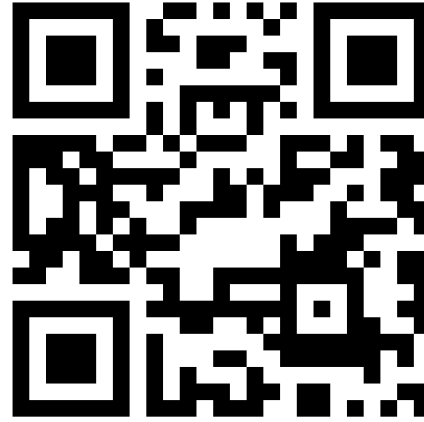


# Questions?



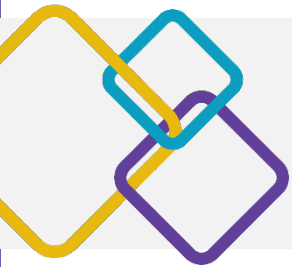
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