Connection Planning:  
A Brief Intervention to Reduce Isolation & Loneliness

Kim Van Orden, PhD  
Associate Professor  
Department of Psychiatry  
University of Rochester Medical Center  

Geriatric Medicine Grand Rounds  
November 17, 2021

social connection is medicine

Social connections that create a sense of caring, contributing, and community have a range of benefits for health and well-being at all ages.

“Unlike many other illnesses, what I find profoundly empowering about addressing loneliness is that the ultimate solution to loneliness lies in each of us. We can be the medicine that each other needs. We can be the solution other people crave. We are all doctors and we are all healers.” —Vivek Murthy, MD, MBA, U.S. Surgeon General

Social disconnection increases risk for all leading causes of death in the U.S.

Topics to discuss

1. Social connection: what is it?
   - Aspects of social relationships linked with better health

2. Evidence base for promoting social connection
   - Evidence-informed strategies & promising programs

3. Connection Planning
   - Community resources for addressing social connection in your patients

Number of deaths for leading causes of death

- Heart disease: 659,041
- Cancer: 599,601
- Accidents (unintentional injuries): 173,040
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases: 156,979
- Stroke (cerebrovascular diseases): 150,005
- Alzheimer’s disease: 121,499
- Diabetes: 87,647
- Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome, and nephrosis: 51,565
- Influenza and pneumonia: 49,783
- Intentional self-harm (suicide): 47,511

Source: Mortality in the United States, 2019, data table for figure 2
Part I: Background on Social Connection

What is social connection?

1. Structural: social integration vs. isolation
2. Functional: social support
3. Quality: Subjective perceptions (e.g., loneliness, belonging, relationship quality)

There are three important parts to social connection:

- how often and who you connect with
- the support you get from your connections (e.g., for physical or emotional support or for learning new information)
- how you feel about our connections (e.g., feeling lonely or a sense of belonging).

Social connection is when you connect with other people, either in person or from afar. For example, you can connect with friends, family, neighbours, pen pals or even grocery store workers. You can also support your well-being with other types of connection, such as connecting with animals, with nature or through your faith.
Ways to measure social connection

### Social Isolation
- **Definition:** Characteristics of social ties & relationships; social networks.
- **Key Terms:** marital status, social contact, social integration, social isolation, living alone, lack of confidant.
- **Sample assessments:**
  - Presence of a confidant: Do you have someone in your life you trust and feel close to, someone you can talk to about personal matters?
  - Berkman-Syme Social Integration Index: social network size, frequency of contact with friends & family; participation in social activities

### Social Support
- **Definition:** Functions provided by social ties & relationships.
- **Key Terms:** received and perceived support; informational, instrumental, emotional support.
- **Sample assessment:** PROMIS Emotional Support Short Form® (never, rarely, sometimes, usually, always):
  - I have someone who will listen to me when I need to talk;
  - I have someone to confide in or talk to about myself or my problems;
  - I have someone who makes me feel appreciated;
  - I have someone to talk with when I have a bad day.

### Loneliness
- **Definition:** Loneliness is the subjective perception of lacking meaningful social connections and may also include feeling like one doesn't belong to valued relationships and groups.
- **Key Terms:** loneliness, belonging.
- **Brief assessment:** UCLA 3-item Loneliness Scale® (1=hardly ever, 2=some of the time, 3=often); score of 6 or greater indicates clinically-significant loneliness:
  - How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
  - How often do you feel left out?
  - How often do you feel isolated from others?

---


---

How does social connection influence health? (at least) 3 related pathways

- Buffering stress
- Healthy behaviors
- Need to belong
Contributors & Consequences

Mental Health:
- depression,
- hopelessness,
- Well-being,
- suicide

Physical Health:
- Subjective perceptions;
- Presence of disease

Cognition:
- Better memory & planning,
- Lower risk for dementia

Functional Status:
- Mobility
- Self-care
- Strength

Social Connection

Part II: Interventions to Promote Social Connection
The evidence base for connectedness interventions

Can behavioral interventions reduce loneliness? **Yes.**
- Two meta-analyses: Masi et al. (2011), Hickin et al. (2021)

What are evidence-based interventions for reducing loneliness & isolation? **Unclear.**


Evidence base: programs to promote connection in older adults

- **Mindfulness approaches** that teach acceptance and self-compassion reduce psychological distress and may reduce loneliness (two RCTs)
- **Brief, behavioral therapies** hold promise (two RCTs)
- **Group exercise & health promotion** hold promise, especially as they are non-stigmatizing (zero RCTs)
- **Pets** (both robotic and real) hold promise (several RCTs in long-term care)
- **Peer companionship & friendly calling**: promising (two RCTs), but acceptability outside research programs may be low
- **Technology programs**: these programs likely provide benefit to many older adults but it’s not clear which platforms are effective and accessible.
- **Services supported by the Older Americans Act**: home-delivered meals, senior centers, care management are widely used but there are no controlled studies
The evidence base for connectedness interventions is lacking

• Can behavioral interventions reduce loneliness? Yes.
  • Two meta-analyses: Masi et al. (2011), Hickin et al. (2021)

• What are evidence-based interventions for reducing loneliness & isolation? Unclear.
  1. Absence of replication or standardized programs.
  2. Mechanisms unclear (group versus individual; maintenance over time).
  3. Most studies do not enroll lonely individuals.
  4. Low uptake in community of research-tested programs
  5. Most commonly provided programs are not tested
  6. Numerous pathways to social connection: one-size-fits-all is unlikely to be effective (or acceptable)

Connection Planning
Creating a ‘Connections’ Plan
*An evidence-informed brief intervention*

- Analogous to Safety Planning for suicidal behavior
  - Can be done in a brief (e.g., 30 minute) session
  - Can be standalone or part of psychotherapy (and evolve)
- Slightly more intensive than simple recommendation for ways to connect
  - Being intentional about connections may be a new concept
  - Motivational barriers
- Applying basic CBT principles to a brief intervention for social connectedness
  - Few interventions with efficacy in increasing social connections and reducing loneliness.

**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**
*Applied to social connectedness*

- **Thinking** (self-talk)
- **Loneliness & stress**
- **Feeling** (in your body)
- **Doing** (actions)
Clinician’s primary task is assessment of social connectedness

- Assessment goals are to determine:
  - What is causing feelings of loneliness and isolation
  - What the client values socially
  - What barriers exist that make it difficult to find new ways to connect.
The ‘cognitive model’ applied to connectedness: *Psychoeducation*

**Matching thoughts to emotions exercise**

This exercise is a helpful way to discuss the relationship between thoughts and feelings. It shows how different interpretations of being alone can lead to different thoughts and emotions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts</th>
<th>Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What if I get sick and there’s no one to help me?</td>
<td>Guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will become a burden on my son.</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one cares about me.</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Strategies to change your perspective**

**Ask**

Ask yourself:
- “How can I view this situation from a different perspective.”
- “How would someone I think highly of view this situation?”
- Remind yourself, “Don’t believe everything you think!”

**Practice**

Practice mindfulness or a spiritual practice.
- Headspace.com

**Write down**

Write down your thoughts:
- List reasons that support the thought and reasons that challenge that thought.
- E.g., “no one cares about me” → “friends and family are protecting my health by not visiting”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ask</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Write down</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask yourself:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice mindfulness or a spiritual practice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write down your thoughts:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategies to change your body sensations

Soothe all five senses
Listen to music, smell freshly baked cookies, pet your dog/cat, look at artwork, taste your favorite food, step outside

Practice calming activities
Mindful breathing
Muscle relaxation
Imagery

Change your temperature
Warm up by taking a bath or sipping warm tea. Cool down by splashing cold water on your face or holding an ice cube.

Doing: connecting with others in new ways

1. Focus on helping others
   • Volunteer remotely (e.g., write letters to someone living in a nursing home) or take care of a neighbor’s pet or plants.

2. Connect with others in safe ways
   • Call loved ones, look at photographs or call friendly lines for support.

3. Remind yourself of our shared humanity:
   • Connect with nature (e.g., watching birds or looking at flowers), make art or listen to music.
Example 1: Mr. Jones who lives alone at home

- Mr. X is a 74-year-old widowed man who lives alone in an apartment.
  - Mobility issues due to past hip fracture
  - Unable to drive due to vision loss.
- Thinking:
  - “I am being forgotten by my neighbors.” → “My neighbors have not forgotten me. They would appreciate spending time with me, but circumstances out of their control make it difficult to visit.”
- Feeling:
  - When anxious he takes five deep breaths and imagines he is in his childhood home, which is a positive memory for him.
- Doing:
  - Plan to call other members of his church who also live alone to check in.
  - Plan to call his neighbor to learn how to set up video calls.

Ms. Zayas, a Spanish-speaking woman who lives alone

- Ms. Z is a 59-year-old Spanish-speaking woman who lives alone.
  - Born and lived in Puerto Rico until 2017, moved to live near her daughter and grandchildren in the wake of Hurricane Maria.
  - Relies on her daughter for transportation and as her English interpreter.
  - Ms. Z reports feeling increasingly anxious and isolated. She feels worried for her family in Puerto Rico and feels trapped in her own home.
- Thinking:
  - “I’m a burden on my family.” → “My family wants to take care of me because they love and need me.”
- Feeling:
  - Anxiety about lack of information about home and current pandemic: listens to favorite music from childhood to feel calm and safe.
- Doing:
  - Lack of activities with others who speak Spanish (due to social distancing): plans regular calls with other members from the senior center and her family in Puerto Rico.
Mr. Yang, who lives in a nursing home

- Mr. Yang is a 77-year-old, Chinese male; admitted to a nursing home 6 months ago due to frequent falls & difficulties with ADL's.
  - Wife of 45 years resides in their home and would visit several times a week before the pandemic; they used to enjoy cooking together and going on walks.
  - Spends much of his time watching TV in his room or sleeping.
  - Difficulty following conversations over the phone.
- Collaborative process with behavioral health clinician, recreation therapist, social worker.
  - Video conferencing
  - Scrapbook with recreation therapist
  - Poster for staff

Connection Planning Resources

- Free handouts:
  - [https://www.eenet.ca/resource/social-connection-isolated-older-adults](https://www.eenet.ca/resource/social-connection-isolated-older-adults)
- Article in *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* (free download):
  - [https://www.ajgponline.org/article/S1064-7481(20)30333-X/fulltext](https://www.ajgponline.org/article/S1064-7481(20)30333-X/fulltext)
- VA VISN 5 MIRECC Connection Plans manual:
  - [https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/connection_plans.asp](https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn5/training/connection_plans.asp)
- Video, Connect During Covid:
  - Available on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com)
Pulling it All Together:
What we know and don’t know (yet)

1. We know that social connection matters for health, well-being, and longevity including suicide ideation and behavior.
2. We know that social isolation and loneliness have many causes and consequences.
3. We know that behavioral programs can reduce loneliness and social isolation.
4. We don’t know yet which programs are most effective, for whom, in what circumstances, or why they work.
5. We hope to learn how to tailor intervention strategies to address individualized contributors to loneliness and isolation.

Programs to Reduce Social Isolation & Loneliness in the Rochester Area

Psychotherapy & counseling:
• Older Adults Service at UR Medicine: 585-602-1000
• PEARLS @ Lifespan (in-home counseling) & Geriatric Addiction Program: 585-244-8400

Volunteering:
• Americorps Seniors: For a personal introduction to AmeriCorps Seniors call Deb Palumbos at 585-651-9388 or email dpalumbos@lifespanrochester.org
• Contribute to research: The HOPE Lab & The Rochester Roybal Center for Social Ties & Aging Research

Mindfulness:
• Tai Chi at Lifespan (585-287-6439) https://www.lifespan-roch.org/health-wellness
• Headspace: https://www.headspace.com

Group exercise & health promotion groups
• Matter of Balance (Falls Prevention) at Lifespan (585-287-6439)
• Living Healthy Courses at Lifespan (585-287-6439)
• Silver Sneakers at the YMCA

Lifelong Learning Groups:
• OASIS: https://rochester.oasisnet.org
• Osher Lifelong Learning Institute: https://www.rit.edu/oil/qlnh/
• Classes at Lifespan: https://www.lifespan-roch.org/new-events
• Monroe County Library System: https://calendar.monroelibrary.org

Geriatric Care Management, home-delivered meals
• Lifespan: https://www.lifespan-roch.org
• The Community Place: https://www.centremporich.org/endurance/pag3
• Greater Lakes Caring & Planning Services for Caregivers: toll-free at 844-249-7126

Social groups & support:
• Friendly calling: SilverLine NY at Lifespan (585-287-6439) connects older adults with weekly friendly phone calls by volunteers.
• Wolk Cafe in Sibley Square, Lily Cafe at the Maplewood YMCA: https://www.lifespan-roch.org/health-wellness

Robotic Pets: [Link]

National Resources:
• AARP Social Isolation tools: https://connect2affect.org/
• National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults: https://www.engagingolderadults.org/
Stay connected!

- Kim Van Orden: kimberly_vanorden@urmc.rochester.edu
- The HOPE Lab is enrolling for a randomized trial for adults aged 60 or older
  - https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/labs/van-orden/projects.aspx
  - Email: HOPE@urmc.Rochester.edu
  - Call: (585) 273-1811
- Research studies for those caring for a loved one with dementia:
  - Email: HARP@urmc.rochester.edu
  - Call (585) 276-6204
  - https://research.son.rochester.edu/rocstarcenter/active-studies.html