

# 5 Ways to Reduce Loneliness Among Seniors and Enhance Their Well-Being

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In our youth, most of us were eager to **grow older**. We can't wait to get our driver's license; graduate from high school, gain our independence, and land our first job. As we get older, well the tables turn. We've all heard the saying, "getting older sucks" or that "there is no gold in the golden years." Life can be challenging and so is growing older.

People sometimes ask me, "David, what's the secret to aging well?" While no one can promise a magic pill or eternal life, there are certain things fundamental to healthy aging.

Apart from some common challenges like diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure, there is growing evidence of the powerful negative effects of loneliness. Millions of older adults live their lives void of meaningful social engagement. They're lonely. The problem is so big, experts are declaring loneliness a bigger health epidemic than obesity.

Older adults who report feeling lonely are 45% more likely to die sooner and at 59% greater risk of health decline compared to their socially engaged counterparts. Simply put, loneliness is detrimental to our health, especially as we age.



Let's take a moment to think about how the brain works. Though our brains are a complex neuronal biochemical soup, imagine for a minute

it is a complex muscle trapped between our ears. Like any muscle, the more we exercise it, the stronger and healthier it becomes. In fact, as we age, we can retrain and rewire the parts, pathways, and

processes of our brains.

We know that keeping our brains active is important. Interestingly, the simple act of meaningful social engagement builds cognitive reserves. Just like forcing ourselves to exercise releases positive chemicals in our brains, so does forcing ourselves to engage socially in meaningful ways.

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So what can we do about it? Here are the top 5 ways to reduce loneliness.



## Meaningful Social Engagement

Meaningful social engagement offers more positive biochemical benefits for our aging brains than many novel drug interventions. Combined with other key aspects of healthy aging, meaningful social engagement can also prevent and protect our brains from some of the common challenges of aging.

Meaningful social engagement need not be difficult. Make it a goal to place yourself in social settings regularly, especially as we age:

- Share a coffee or meal with friends
- Meet new people, make new friends
- Attend free community events or a class with strangers
- Make your way to religious services
- Join a meditation or yoga class



Like a hamster on a wheel, you may get stuck in a circle of negativity ...“Oh no, I have been invited to a social. I didn’t sleep well last night. I don’t know anyone going. It will be raining. Why bother going? It will be boring anyway. I won’t know anyone.”

Instead, with positive thinking we can change our thoughts with an optimistic perspective... “I have nothing to lose. Maybe I will meet someone interesting. Or learn something new. Besides, it will be

good to get out. And I will feel proud of myself afterward. I can do this.”



## Learning Something New

When you learn something new it engages different parts of your brain. This can be as complex as learning a new language, taking dance lessons, or as simple as brushing our teeth/hair with the opposite hand.

Doing and/or learning something new protects the brain and reduces the negative effects of loneliness, making us less lonely. If we have a routine, try to think about how to achieve the same result differently. Switch up your walking route, eat with your opposite hand, learn a new recipe, how to play chess, or a new card game.



## Positive Thinking

More than seeing rainbows and smelling roses, positive thinking involves stopping worry and changing negative thoughts into something positive. The glass may be half empty, but that first half tasted delicious. Our thoughts can take on a life of their own.



## Physical Activity

More than just our bodies moving, physical activity “moves our brains”. Physical activity moves different parts of our brains and releases positive chemicals that reduce the negative effects of loneliness.

An ideal daily amount is 30 minutes with at least 20 minutes consecutive. These activities don’t need to be competitive high-intensity activities. Walking, chair and balancing exercises (like standing on 1 foot for 10 seconds, 10 times a day), stretching (trying to touch your toes while standing or sitting), or riding a recumbent bike.



That said, depressed or anxious are real illnesses and make us more lonely for longer periods. Depression and anxiety are not a normal part of aging. If you think you are depressed or anxious, speak to your health professional, take it seriously and get the help you need.

So never underestimate how detrimental loneliness is to our health, especially as we age. If you or someone you love is lonely, you have the power to turn this around. Act on any one or all of these proven ways to reduce loneliness. Life is meant to be shared – it is part of what makes us human. If you are unsure what to do, please ask someone for help.



## Maintaining Mental Health

Mental health is not just about recognizing and treating mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. While depression and anxiety place us at greater risk for loneliness, maintaining our mental health is also about doing things for ourselves.

- Joining a prayer group
- Learning meditation
- Going to a yoga class
- Enjoying an Epsom Salt or bubble bath
- Calling or writing someone you have not seen in a while



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