

Social Engagement



Introduction

As a caregiver, you may be responsible for planning and preparing social outings and appointments. Depending on a person's level of frailty, you may be one of the only people they socialize with.

It can be upsetting to see the person you care for alone or unengaged. You might be wondering:

- How do I know if they are experiencing social isolation, loneliness, or depression?
- What can I do to increase social engagement?
- How do I seek out additional supports related to social engagement?

This chapter may help you answer these questions. By applying, and adapting the strategies in this chapter, you can help increase the social connections of the person you care for.

Did you Know?

- Depending on the person, social isolation can lead to loneliness.
- Being socially engaged in meaningful activities can make a person feel less lonely.
- Loneliness can lead to depression, and poor health.
- Depression is one of the most common mental health issues that impact older adults.
- As a result of spending most of their time providing care and support to a senior experiencing frailty, many caregivers also experience isolation, loneliness, and depression.
- The topics of social isolation and loneliness do not often come up in conversation with health care professionals.
- There is help for people who feel isolated, lonely, and depressed. There are services in the community that can help!

Key Terms

The following are definitions of terms that are used throughout this chapter. Understanding and differentiating between each of these terms can be helpful when communicating with health care professionals.

Social engagement is when a person is involved in meaningful activities with others and is maintaining close, fulfilling relationships.

Social isolation results when a person has very rare contact with others.

Loneliness is a feeling that results from wanting to be connected to other people but those people and connections are not there.

Depression is the result of feeling sad on a daily basis for two weeks or more. Depression causes a person to feel helpless, hopeless, and perhaps like a burden to others.

The information in this chapter is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified health care professional. Please consult your health care professional for advice about specific medical conditions. Look for our [helpful tips on communicating with health care professionals](#).

Recognize Isolation, Loneliness, and Depression

Is the person you're caring for socially isolated?

There are a number of factors that may increase the likelihood of a person becoming socially isolated. Recognizing social isolation early on and getting support immediately could help avoid feelings of loneliness and depression.

Consider the following risk factors:

- Any history of mental health concerns.
- Difficulty with hearing or vision.
- Living alone.
- No children or family in general.
- Disabilities or health challenges.
- Recent major life changes, such as the loss of friends/relationships, grief, changed living arrangements, etc.



These risk factors can all contribute to a person being alone more often and less able to get out of the house. If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, the person you care for may be at risk of social isolation. It may be helpful to speak with the person to understand how they might be more socially engaged, what activities would be most enjoyable for them, how they would like to be with other people and when.

Is the person you care for lonely?

If the person you care for is at risk of being socially isolated, you may want to consider if they are experiencing loneliness. The best way to explore these feelings is by speaking with them directly about what you are observing.

A good place to start this conversation is by asking the person if they feel lonely and why. Then you can continue the conversation by asking the following questions:

- How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
- How often do you feel left out?
- How often do you feel isolated from others?

These questions are part of a validated screening tool called the *Three-Item Loneliness Scale*. Once completed, this screening tool can be great resource to bring with you to visits with a health care professional. To complete the full screening tool, see [Tool 8.1: Three-Item Loneliness Scale](#).

When to Seek Immediate Help

1. Please call 911 immediately if the person you care for is telling you that they plan to harm themselves or others, or you suspect that they will.
2. If the person you care for has discussed thoughts of wanting to die or that they “wish there were ways to end their suffering” but do not intend to hurt themselves, seek help immediately. ConnexOntario has a free, 24/7 support service for mental health, crisis, addictions, and more. You can call them any time to discuss your concerns and get help with the next steps: 1-866-531-2600 or visit their website for more information at: <https://www.connexontario.ca/>
3. To learn more about suicide prevention in older adults, download the guide for family members: <https://cloudfront.ualberta.ca/-/media/hrs/health-and-wellbeing/mental-health/suicide/preventing-suicide-among-older-adults.pdf>

Is the person you are caring for depressed?

Given that loneliness is a risk factor for depression, it is important to be aware of common signs of depression. If you observe that the person you are caring for has had changes in mood and/or behaviour or is showing signs of sadness, consider the common signs of depression in the table below.

Common Signs of Depression

Signs of Depression	Example
Feeling Hopeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It’s hopeless; I’ll never get better...what’s the point anyway?” • “No one cares about me.” • “You are wasting your time because that will never work.” • “I don’t want to try anymore.”
Stopping Usual Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They no longer take part in activities that they once enjoyed (card games with their social group, going to church, etc.) • They seem to have lost interest in hobbies (they stop gardening, painting, listening to or playing music, etc.).
Mood Swings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mood swings are high and low and come and go quickly. • They cry during your visits or they may push you away with anger.
Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They tell you they often feel nervous or on edge, and they are not sure why. • They appear to be worrying all the time about their health, your life, other people’s lives, etc. • They tell you they feel their heart is racing, their mouth is dry and their hands are shaky.
Altered Sleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They sleep all day or most of the day. • They may also have trouble falling asleep and staying asleep.
Weight Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You notice the person gaining weight as a result of overeating. • You may also notice the person losing weight as a result of eating less than their usual.



The more signs you are noticing above, the higher chance that the person is experiencing depression. Discuss the signs you are noticing with the person. Explain what you notice, ask them how you can help, and plan to speak with a health care professional together as soon as possible, to get connected to the right services.

Strategies to Increase Social Engagement

How can you encourage social engagement?

One of the best ways to encourage social engagement is to help a person take part in the activities they enjoy, with people they like to be around. It is not about the number of activities they participate in, or the number of people. What matters most is the quality of the activity and social connection. For example, some people may enjoy spending time with one other person. For others, socializing means to dine with a large group, volunteer, or participate in group activities.

The following ideas may help you think creatively about social engagement:

Ask the Person.

- Start with a conversation about what activities they enjoy and who they enjoy spending time with.
- How did they enjoy spending their time in the past? Did they prefer their alone time? Did they love large group gatherings? What activities did they find most enjoyable?

Myths about Social Engagement

X *All people who are alone are lonely.*

Many people find being alone is a way to reflect and re-energize for the next day. People who spend a lot of time alone do not always consider themselves lonely. Depending on a person's lifestyle and personality, they may be more comfortable quietly reading the paper or watching the birds than gathering with a large group of people. It is more important to consider meaningful engagement rather than assuming that people who are alone need to be with other people all the time. The first step to understanding what works best for another person is ask them.

X *It is normal for older adults to feel lonely and depressed.*

Loneliness and depression are serious health issues that should not be considered part of the normal process of aging. Regardless of a person's age, loneliness and depression can lead to poor health and quality of life. Individuals feeling this way are encouraged to speak to a health care professional as soon as possible to strategize helpful ways to increase meaningful social engagement.

“My mom is alone for most of the week other than my visits. Sometimes it is by choice but other times I think she may be feeling lonely. A friend told me that loneliness can lead to depression. Learning about social engagement has helped me understand where I can offer the most help to my mom.”

– A caregiver from
Ottawa, ON

Be Creative.

- Being creative does not mean grand gestures. In this case, being creative means considering all opportunities for social engagement inside and outside of the home, such as:
- Running errands and daily chores together.
- Listening to music together.
- Looking through old photos or memory boxes and allowing the person to tell you what they are thinking about.
- Visiting a favorite bakery or restaurant and the taste of favorite foods.

Keep it Simple.

- Each visit is an opportunity for social engagement!
- Social engagement does not mean that there has to be a lot of talking. Listen and validate how someone is feeling. Allowing time for silence and reflection helps thoughts to develop and the conversation to build.
- People need to feel that they matter. This can be accomplished by just being present with someone else. Sitting and watching the birds with a person who enjoys that activity can make a big difference in that person’s day.
- Ask open ended questions and see where the conversation goes. When a person only gives you a one-word answer, try asking, “Tell me more about that.” You’ll be surprised by how a conversation can grow.

Consider Barriers.

- Are there reasons that a person cannot get out of their house, even though they would love to? Consider possible ways to address barriers yourself or with the help of community services. Possible barriers include:
 - Needing transportation or assistance with walking.
 - Needing another person to be with them for safety reasons.
 - Challenges with vision or hearing.
 - Health issues that make long outings impossible or challenging.
- By preparing for the potential or real barriers in advance, you will increase the likelihood for enjoyment of the activity for everyone.
- For more information on how to find community services, see the [finding additional supports](#) section.



Helpful tips to Communicate with Health Care Professionals

When speaking with health care professionals, it is important to be prepared so that they can provide support by offering the right help at the right time.

Unfortunately, discussing feelings of loneliness and depression openly is not a common practice. Even if your health care professional does not ask about loneliness or depression, you can still bring it up.

The following are some helpful tips on how to communicate with health care professionals about loneliness and depression:

Offer detail.

- The more detail you can provide about a change in a person's mood and behaviour, the more a health professional can work out different strategies to help.
- Offer details like when the behaviour started; how long they have been feeling this way; what you have tried so far; and anything that has happened recently that could cause feelings of loneliness or depression (e.g. death of a friend, family has moved away, or they have recently moved from their home to retirement home).
- As a starting point, share the results of the completed [Tool 8.1: Three-Item Loneliness Scale](#).
- If depression is suspected, share the unexpected changes you have noticed in the person you are caring for. Use the common signs of depression list offered in this chapter to help you share these changes.
- Beyond explaining who you are and the relationship you have with the person, offer details about your caregiving role, and the support you provide.

Ask questions.

Are there reasons for the changes I am seeing in the person I am caring for?

- Health care professionals may want to figure out why someone's mood and behaviour may have changed, especially if this change is something that has come on quickly. They may review medications, ask about daily routine and habits, and may consider doing medical tests to understand more.

What support does the community have to offer for supporting social engagement?

- Health care professionals should know about geriatric teams, and community programs that support social engagement, dining programs, different hobby clubs, and social workers or counselors that are local to you. They will be able to tell you and the person you care for about these services and if they think a referral is needed.

Finding Additional Support

How do I find additional support related to social engagement?

Ask a health care professional.

Ask a qualified health care professional who can provide direction. There is no one way to navigate the health care system. It is different depending on where you live and what it is you are looking for. A good first step to finding the right services is to ask a qualified and trusted health care professional.

Look online.

- You can search for social engagement activities or services that support loneliness and depression by going online and browsing the Healthline, Health Services for Ontario website at: www.thehealthline.ca/.
- To find places that you can go for social activities and fun, you can browse the Government of Ontario website: www.ontario.ca/page/seniors-connect-your-community.
- To learn more about finding specialized help for depression, visit the Canadian Mental Health Association website: <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/understanding-and-finding-help-for-depression/>.
- To learn more about information and referral services for mental health and addictions, visit the ConnexOntario website: <http://www.connexontario.ca/>.

Call.

- To speak to a registered nurse for non-urgent health advice or for general health information, call Telehealth Ontario: Toll-free: 1-866-797-0000; or Toll-free TTY: 1-866-797-0007. You can also learn more about their service by visiting their website: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/get-medical-advice-telehealth-ontario>.

Summary

This chapter has provided you with information about social engagement, social isolation, loneliness and depression. This information may help you recognize if a person is at risk of social isolation. You are now able to create strategies to increase the social engagement of the person you care for.



Tool 8.1: Three-Item Loneliness Scale²²

You may want to consider if the person you are caring for is experiencing loneliness. One way to explore feelings of loneliness is to ask the person the questions offered in the tool below.

Discuss each of the questions below with the person you care for and circle the appropriate score. Once completed, add the scores together for a total.

Scores closer to nine (9) indicate that the person is likely experiencing loneliness. Anything over a score of six (6) should be discussed with a health care professional.

Sharing these results with a health care professional could lead to a helpful conversation about the services available to increase social engagement.

Question:	Hardly Ever	Some of the Time	Often
First, how often do you feel that you lack companionship: Hardly ever, some of the time, or often?	1	2	3
How often do you feel left out: Hardly ever, some of the time, or often?	1	2	3
How often do you feel isolated from others? Hardly ever, some of the time, or often?	1	2	3
Score	/9		

²² Hughes, M., Waite, L., Hawkley, L., Cacioppo, J. (2004). A Short Scale for Measuring Loneliness in Large Surveys: Results From Two Population-Based Studies. *Res Aging*, 26(6), 655–672; Retrieved from: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b855bd5cef372d1e9a8ef0e/t/5ccc5008b208fcd615da0870/1556893704715/Measuring+Loneliness+Scale+SEOAT.pdf>

References

Social Engagement

Canadian Mental Health Association. (2019). *Backgrounder on seniors' mental health*. Retrieved from: <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/backgrounder-on-seniors-mental-health/>.

Family Caregiver Alliance, National Centre on Caregiving. (2019). *Caregiver Isolation and Loneliness*. Retrieved from: <https://www.caregiver.org/caregiver-isolation-and-loneliness>

Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, & Layton JB. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS Med*, 7(7), e1000316

Hughes, ME., Waite, LJ., Hawkley, LC., & Cacioppo, JT. (2004). A short scale for measuring loneliness in large surveys: Results from two population-based studies. *Research on Aging*, 26(6), 655-72.

RGP of Toronto. (2018). SF7 Toolkit, Retrieved from: <https://www.rgptoronto.ca/resources/>.

Singh, A., & Misra, N. (2009). Loneliness, depression and sociability in old age. *Ind Psychiatry*, 18(1), 51-55.

Notes



A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes.



© 2019 Regional Geriatric Programs (RGPs) of Ontario.
Permission granted to use without editing and with appropriate citation.

If reproducing or adapting the content in the handbook, RGPO must be credited as the author with the following citation:

Regional Geriatric Programs of Ontario. (2019). Caregiving Strategies Handbook: Providing Care and Support for a Senior Living with Frailty. Retrieved from www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies

For more information on the Senior Friendly Caregiver Education Project and the Regional Geriatric Programs of Ontario, please visit www.rgps.on.ca/caregiving-strategies.

