

# Social Isolation & Loneliness

## What is social isolation?

Social isolation happens when a person has little or no contact with other people. Isolation may be over a short or long time period. It's a physical state of not being around others.

## What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a feeling of being alone, empty, or separated from others. It's an emotional state. It can be felt even when people are surrounded by others. Just being around other people isn't a "fix" for loneliness.

All people feel lonely from time to time. It can become a problem when the feeling becomes chronic.

**Isolation**  
A person may be socially isolated and not feel lonely.

**Loneliness**  
A person may be surrounded by people and feel lonely.

## Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Health

Isolation and/or loneliness can affect anyone. Experiencing social isolation and/or feeling lonely can be bad for your health. They're related to health problems like cardiovascular disease (e.g., stroke, heart attack), mental health problems (e.g., depression, cognitive decline, dementia), and pre-mature or early death.

### Who is at risk?

- Seniors and older adults (80+).
- People who live alone (e.g., single, widowed).
- People who are gender and sexually diverse.
- Individuals and families who have low income.
- People with a disability, chronic illness, and/or mental health problem.
- People who are unemployed (e.g., lost work, retired).
- Children and youth (e.g., bullied, newly moved, few connections, beliefs, sexuality, gender).
- People in life transitions (e.g., new moms with few social supports, young adults with new job or starting school, people retiring).
- People in institutional settings or rural areas.



Some people may experience social isolation due to cultural differences, language barriers, or religious beliefs.



## How do social isolation & loneliness impact each other?

Isolation may lead to loneliness, and sometimes, loneliness may make isolation worse. Sometimes isolation and feelings of loneliness may happen at the same time without one being caused by the other.

Social isolation or not being around others for a long period of time can leave people feeling lonely.

Loneliness may come on due to being socially isolated, but it can be caused by other things including the death of a loved one, breakups or divorce, or moving.

Feeling lonely for a long time may make it hard to engage with others and lead to a fear of rejection. This may lead to social isolation.

## Community & society factors that decrease risk for social isolation and loneliness.

Having access to:

- Public and private transportation.
- Family, friends, health services, community centres, recreation, outdoor space, and places that help maintain relationships.
- Safe shared public spaces (e.g., good street lighting, sidewalks).
- Public sector funding and pension structures.
- Political, cultural, and social values that offer inclusive and equitable social systems.

## What can your organization do?

1) Know who may be at risk.

- Become familiar with the risk factors associated with social isolation and loneliness.

2) Promote existing services for people who may be experiencing social isolation and/or loneliness.

- Call **211** or visit [www.ab.211.ca/](http://www.ab.211.ca/) to learn about other resources and services provided in your area.

3) Know how people in your community like to connect and what they have access to. Consider:

- Do they have access to technology (e.g. cellular services, high-speed internet)?
- Do they have the skills and confidence to use certain platforms (e.g. apps, teleconferencing, video conferencing)?
- How do they prefer to connect with others? Not everyone will want to connect in the same way.

4) Innovate! Collaborate with other community and social services in your area. Consider:

- Creating a collective understanding and a shared sense of responsibility to tackle social isolation and loneliness.
- Exploring new connections and interventions with other services and sectors (e.g. individuals, public services, non-profit organizations, private businesses) that draw on individual strengths and expertise.
- Expanding or discovering new audiences for current interventions.
- Using new technologies.

## Community examples of taking action on social isolation and loneliness.

Overall, evidence for effective action is limited, but actions that tackle social isolation and loneliness typically provide opportunities for social interaction in three main categories: maintaining existing relationships, facilitating new connections, and promoting positive mental health.

1) **Maintain existing relationships** by improving access to transportation and technology.

### Transportation



Lack of accessible and cost-efficient transportation services can reduce opportunities to be socially active within the surrounding community. It can also present barriers in obtaining employment, education, and healthcare services.

Here are a few examples:

- Several municipalities in Alberta have public transit passes at reduced rates for seniors and low-income families. There are also programs that donate transit tickets for those in need (e.g., **Donate A Ride** in Edmonton).
- Volunteer shuttle services provide affordable transportation for seniors and those with disabilities to help run daily errands and attend social or community events. Examples in Alberta:
  - **Drive Happiness** (Edmonton)
  - **Hardisty & District Handivan Society** (Hardisty & Area)
  - **Calgary Seniors' Resource Society**—Practical Kindness Program and Essential Transportation Program (Calgary – Covid-19 specific)

## Technology



Access to technology can help to improve social support networks and feelings of connectedness. Technology can also be used to create new and innovative ways to connect with others.

Not everyone has access to electronic devices (e.g., laptops, computers, cellphones) or the infrastructure required to support these devices. Programs and initiatives have been developed to increase access to these devices by lending or donating devices to those in need (e.g., **Project Joy** in Edmonton).

Other programs work with individuals to develop competencies and confidence in using electronic devices and social platforms (e.g., **Cyber Seniors** in Canada & the United States).

Technologies like social media platforms are designed to bring people together, but in some cases they may not.

In one study, young adults aged 19-32, who reported higher social media use were three times more likely to feel socially isolated than those who used social media less often.

In another study, people who felt their online interactions were more negative and who compared themselves to others more frequently experienced higher levels of depression and anxiety than people who felt their online interactions were more positive.



2) **Facilitate new connections** in-person, over the phone, or online either in a group or one-on-one.

### In-person



Actions addressing social isolation and loneliness tend to be in the form of social groups or clubs, volunteer activities, and interest or activity groups (e.g., fitness classes, health topics, crafting, knitting, book clubs, coffee chats). A few examples:

- **Meetup** (Alberta)
- **Minds in Motion** (Edmonton & Area)
- **Men's Sheds** (Calgary, Camrose, Edmonton, and Canada)

Intergenerational approaches to promote connections between youth or university students and seniors can help at-risk groups. A few examples:

- **Seniors for Kids Society** (Cochrane)
- **GenHelp** (Calgary)
- **Big Brothers Big Sisters** (Canada)

### Over the phone



Interactive telephone-based social and health programming actions for social isolation and loneliness may include things like coffee and group chats, game nights, and well-being or mindfulness sessions. Some interventions will pair individuals who feel lonely or isolated with volunteers with similar interests for one-on-one weekly chats or quick wellness check-ins. Hotlines have also been created that share pre-recorded jokes and uplifting messages for those who call in. A few examples:

- **Seniors Centre Without Walls** (Edmonton)
- **Keep in Touch Program** (Lethbridge)
- **Student-Senior Isolation Prevention Partnership** (Canada)
- **Joy4All** (Calgary)

## Online



Online interventions can use videoconferencing technology to provide face-to-face virtual programming that would typically occur in-person or over the phone.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok have been used to promote connections and social events in communities. They have also been used to advocate and share personal experiences of social isolation and loneliness.

A few examples:

- **New Friends and Neighborhood Groups** (Calgary)
- **Bowmont Families Together** (Calgary)
- **The Loneliness Project** (Canada)
- **Big & Mini** (United States)



### 3) Promote positive mental health through psychological approaches.

A newer approach to addressing social isolation and loneliness is to offer Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT helps people develop skills and strategies for staying healthy by focusing on the here and now problems of day-to-day life. It helps people identify, question, and change the thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs related to emotional and behavioural reactions that can cause them difficulty.

## One-to-one



CBT interventions with a mental health clinician require a person who has knowledge in and has been trained in CBT. At work, some people may have Family Employee Assistance Programs (FEAP) that offer free CBT.

Information on CBT

- **My Health Alberta** (Alberta)
- **Anxiety Canada** (Canada)

To find a mental health clinician\*

- **AHS Addiction & Mental Health Services** (Alberta)
- **Psychology Today** (Canada)

\*There is a fee for private mental health clinicians.

## Groups



CBT in group therapy may have a specialty focus (e.g., anxiety, social anxiety, post-partum depression). To find a CBT group\* in your area talk to your healthcare provider or go to:

- **Psychology Today** (Canada)

\*There may or may not be a fee for group sessions.

## Online or over the phone



Online self-help programs and apps can help people learn and practice skills to support their mental wellness, prevent and manage symptoms of depression and anxiety, and connect them to counselling (if needed).

- **MindShift CBT** (Canada)
- **Wellness Together Canada** (Website)
- **Happify** (Website)\*
- **Sanvello** (Website/App)\*

\*This app/program is free. However, there is an upgrade that you can pay for.

## Want to learn more?

Check out the additional resources below to help raise awareness and tackle of the issue of social isolation and loneliness in your community.

- [Breaking Loneliness](#) ( Documentry by Brandy Yanchyk)
- [Vancouver Foundation Community Organization Checklist](#)
- [Government of Alberta Reducing Social Isolation for Seniors](#)
- [Edmonton Community Foundation – Belonging](#)

