Understanding Social Isolation and Loneliness

Sheridan Centre for Elder Research

Follow this and additional works at: https://source.sheridancollege.ca/centres_elder_building_connected_communities_resources_understanding-social-isolation

Part of the Community-Based Learning Commons, Community-Based Research Commons, Gerontology Commons, Health Services Research Commons, and the Social Work Commons

SOURCE Citation
https://source.sheridancollege.ca/centres_elder_building_connected_communities_resources_understanding-social-isolation/1

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Professional Development and Training Resources at SOURCE: Sheridan Scholarly Output, Research, and Creative Excellence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Understanding Social Isolation and Loneliness by an authorized administrator of SOURCE: Sheridan Scholarly Output, Research, and Creative Excellence. For more information, please contact source@sheridancollege.ca.
Building Connected Communities: Social Isolation and Loneliness Toolkit

Understanding Social Isolation and Loneliness

Developed by: Sheridan Centre for Elder Research, Oakville ON, Canada – 2019

To access the Social Isolation and Loneliness Toolkit visit:
https://source.sheridancollege.ca/centres_elder_building_connected_communities/
Learning Objectives

- To look at how social isolation is defined
- To look at how loneliness is defined
- To understand how the two relate to each other and how they differ
- To consider the impact on older immigrants and improve health and wellness.
- To understand the connection between social isolation, loneliness and elder abuse
- To discuss how this all relates to our organization
Why talk about social isolation? - Video
What is social isolation?

- An objective state
- Lacking a sense of belonging
- Lacking engagement with others
- Minimal number of social contacts
- Minimal number of fulfilling and quality relationships
- Usually related to (or resulting from) barriers to social participation

(Nicholson, 2009)
Belonging

= Connections + Engagement

(relationships with people) (participation in community)

When people feel a strong sense of belonging to their community, social inclusion improves & individuals report higher levels of positive mental health.

(Community Foundations of Canada, 2015)
To strengthen belonging:

→ Communities need to send signals of acceptance and inclusion

→ Individuals need to build connections with each other and engage in the community

(Community Foundations of Canada, 2015)
Belonging and immigration

• Developing friendships in a new country, especially relationships with individuals outside of their ethnic group can be challenging when an individual experiences language barriers

• Ethnospecific organizations and faith groups may serve as an important “first point of contact” for new immigrants. Here they can build up a sense of belonging

(De Jong Gierveld, 1998)
Discussion questions

1. Is there enough being done in our community to be inclusive to immigrant older adults?

2. What can be done to build a stronger sense of belonging?
What is loneliness?

- A subjective and negative experience, involving feelings of loss of companionship and distress
- Can occur in response to social isolation, or in the absence of it
- Not the same as solitude, which is a personal choice for being alone (without loneliness)
- It is a normal human emotion that for most people varies across the lifespan
- Can occur when there is a mismatch between the quantity or quality of social relationships that a person has compared to what they want

(Cattan et al., 2003; Victor et al., 2012; Perlman & Peplau, 1981; De Jong Gierveld, 2011)
Something to consider…

- “Loneliness” is a word that may not translate into all other languages
- If you are working with interpreters or translators, consider that you may have to define the concept to aid with understanding

Does anyone have any examples of this?
The Campaign to End Loneliness inspires thousands of organizations and people to do more to tackle loneliness in older age.

We are a network of national, regional organizations and people working together through community action, good practice, research and policy. We want to ensure that loneliness is acted upon as a public health priority at national and local levels.

https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/
Connection between social isolation and loneliness

- There is some commonality between loneliness and social isolation, but these terms should not be used interchangeably.
- Social isolation is an objective state in which an individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts and/or they are deficient in fulfilling quality relationships.
- While loneliness is considered to be the subjective expression of dissatisfaction with the level of social contact.
- An individual can feel lonely despite having many social connections. Alternatively, an individual can be socially isolated and not feel lonely.

(Community Development Halton, 2016; Havens et al., 2004)
Health related impact of social isolation and loneliness

- Among the health impacts of social isolation on immigrant and refugee seniors are higher rates of depression, social anxiety and other mental health issues
- Socially isolated older adults are more at risk of negative health behaviours (including being sedentary and not eating well)
- Socially isolated older adults are more likely to experience higher health care utilization rates and incur greater suffering as well as financial costs to themselves, their families, and the health care system

(Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018)
Social impact of social isolation and loneliness

- Social isolation can also lead to the deterioration of valuable social skills
- Social skills may deteriorate are a result of disuse, but also due to the way symptoms of social isolation disrupt social behavior
- Social isolation can lead to elder abuse, including financial abuse

(Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018)
Loneliness and immigration

• Several groups in Canada are at increased risk of loneliness

• Among them, older immigrants are at increased risk for loneliness because they may have fewer social interactions as a result of language barriers and be lacking a sense of belonging to their new communities

• Levels of loneliness among immigrants can be influenced by discrimination or racism, living in poverty, cultural differences, conflicted family values and social networks

(Canada's National Seniors Council, 2014)
Many older immigrants live in multigenerational households. While this is an advantage in some ways, as family connections are important for integration, the dynamics associated with family sponsorship and child care responsibilities introduce risks of social isolation. Some older immigrants also have responsibilities and family obligations that can leave them feeling disconnected from life outside of the family.

(Canada’s National Seniors Council, 2014; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018)
Multigenerational households

- Grandparents may be brought to Canada to care for young children to allow both parents to work.
- Providing childcare in an unfamiliar context may be challenging and isolating, not only in terms of generational differences, but also in terms of cultural differences within the family context.

(Canada's National Seniors Council, 2014; Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018)
Social isolation, loneliness and elder abuse

- Social isolation can lead to elder abuse, including financial abuse
- Older immigrants may not recognize themselves as victims of abuse or be aware of their legal rights or the community resources that are available to them
- Under-reporting of elder abuse has been related to discomfort in discussing the issue, perceived shame, and bringing dishonour to the family

(Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018)
Social isolation, loneliness and elder abuse

• Take a moment and review the following firsthand experiences of older adult immigrants who participated in our research

• Their powerful quotes reveal how social isolation and loneliness are connected to, and can contribute to situations of elder abuse and ageism
“I live in my daughter's house, together with her husband and 2 young children. It is a dysfunctional household where my son-in-law is abusive to me and my daughter. He does not acknowledge any effort or support I make in the house and he does not talk to me most of the time other than being abusive to me verbally. I feel that he wants to push me to live in a long term care home instead of in his house. I go through tremendous stress at home. My daughter told me to avoid interaction with him. My daughter does her best to support me. Other than that I have no support from friends or other family members.”

– Participant 1
“My son-in-law is abusive to me and my husband, my daughter and our grandchildren. I believe many Chinese seniors live in the same situation similar to us, but are not aware of our legal rights, or are too scared to speak up, due to our language barrier, financial difficulty, and isolated living condition. I hope the Canadian government can reach out to Chinese immigrant seniors and help us to understand the laws in Canada and our legal rights, in order for us to seek help.”

– Participant 2
Discussion question

1. Based on what you’ve learned in this training module, how do the experiences of immigrant older adults differ from those of non-immigrants in terms of elder abuse?
2. How can your organization better support immigrant older adults who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing elder abuse?

- What supports are currently in place?
- Is there anything that could be changed or improved?


References


This project was conducted from 2015-19. The research team made every effort to ensure information was accurate as of the time of publication, but please be aware that some of the information may have changed or may be out of date if accessed in the years following that. The inclusion of any agency or service in this toolkit does not constitute an endorsement of the service.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.