Combating Social Isolation During the Pandemic: A Community Dialogue

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UT HEALTH
‘They way I look at it, this virus is going to get you one way or the other!’
OUTLINE

Intro: Case presentations

Impact of social isolation on physical health

Interventions by family members and others

Houston Programs to help your patients/clients
CASE ONE

86 y/o woman with vascular dementia living alone
Starting to decline in Nov 2019 - SLUMS= 22, but functioning okay
April 2020 – almost no recent memory – SLUMS 16
Falls, anxiety
Now requires 24 hour care
CASE TWO

92 year old man with glaucoma on no other medications
Normal SLUMS
Living in CCRC Assisted Living since a fall
Vomits blood one day, hemoglobin down to 5
Large stomach ulcer
CASE THREE

73 y/o woman sustains cognitive changes after bypass SLUMS = 22
Regains mental strength in December SLUMS= 27
Now “my memory getting worse. I’m going to suggest to my daughter move back to Texas. Depressed over not being able to socialize due to the pandemic. I am a people person but am maintaining social distancing. My dogs are getting tired of me.”
Repeat SLUMS = 21
LIVING ALONE

28 percent of older adults in the United States, or 13.8 million people, live alone, according to a report by the Administration for Community Living’s Administration on Aging of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- Harris County - 24.2%
- Harris Count (60+) – 35.1% (2018 ACS data)

Many of them are not lonely or socially isolated.
ISOLATED OR LONELY?

Social isolation is the **objective** physical separation from other people.

Loneliness is the **subjective** distressed feeling of being alone or separated.

Cacioppo Evolutionary Theory of Loneliness is that loneliness automatically triggers a set of related behavioral and biological processes that contribute to the association between loneliness and premature death in people of all ages.
OR BOTH?

Using data from twin studies, Dr. Pedersen and researchers found that:

- both social isolation and loneliness are independent risk factors
- genetic risk for loneliness significantly predicted the presentation of cardiovascular, psychiatric (major depressive disorder), and metabolic traits.

Family history does not strongly influence this effect.
32,624 healthy men with 511 deaths occurred.

- Socially isolated men (not married, fewer than six friends or relatives, no memberships in religious or social organizations) had a 90% increased risk of cardiovascular death and more than double the risk of death from an accident or suicide.

A study done by Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2014) found loneliness to be associated with ill health to a greater degree than just social isolation.

- Stronger relationships were shown between loneliness and worse health, including cardiovascular disease, inflammation, and depression, than social isolation itself.
- Loneliness in older adults was shown to significantly increase risk of functional decline and death in a recent longitudinal cohort study of 1604 followed over six years.
- Some 43% of the cohort reported loneliness and were at higher risk for functional and death.
WHO’S AT RISK

People who find themselves unexpectedly alone due to the death of a spouse or partner, separation from friends or family, retirement, loss of mobility, and lack of transportation are at particular risk.

People who engage in meaningful, productive activities with others tend to live longer, boost their mood, and have a sense of purpose. These activities seem to help maintain their well-being and may improve their cognitive function.
OUTCOMES

High blood pressure,
Heart disease,
Obesity,
Weakened immune system,
Anxiety,
Depression,
Cognitive decline,
Alzheimer’s disease,
Death.
ALTER THE TENDENCY OF CELLS IN THE IMMUNE SYSTEM TO PROMOTE INFLAMMATION.

INFLAMMATION THAT LASTS TOO LONG INCREASES THE RISK OF CHRONIC DISEASES.

ACCELERATE THE BUILDUP OF PLAQUE IN ARTERIES, HELP CANCER CELLS GROW AND SPREAD, AND PROMOTE INFLAMMATION IN THE BRAIN LEADING TO ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE.

WEAKENED IMMUNE CELLS THAT HAVE TROUBLE FIGHTING OFF VIRUSES, WHICH MAKES THEM MORE VULNERABLE TO SOME INFECTIOUS DISEASES.

HAVING A SENSE OF MISSION AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IS LINKED TO HEALTHIER IMMUNE CELLS.
Stress is defined as a state in which homeostasis is actually threatened or perceived to be so.

Homeostasis is re-established by a complex repertoire of behavioral and physiological adaptive responses of the organism (Stress response).

Changes take place in the central nervous system (CNS) and in various peripheral organs and tissues.
Functions of the central nervous system

Facilitation of arousal, alertness, vigilance, cognition, attention and aggression
Inhibition of vegetative functions (e.g. reproduction, feeding, growth)
Activation of counter-regulatory feedback loops

Peripheral functions

Increase of oxygenation
Nutrition of brain, heart and skeletal muscles
Increase of cardiovascular tone and respiration
Increase of metabolism (catabolism, inhibition of reproduction and growth)
Increase of detoxification of metabolic products and foreign substances
Activation of counter-regulatory feedback loops (includes immunosuppression)
The stress system has a basal circadian activity and also responds to stressors on demand.

**Appropriate basal activity**, as tailored responsiveness of the stress system to stressors, is essential for a sense of well-being, adequate performance of tasks and positive social interactions.

**Inappropriate basal activity** and/or responsiveness of the stress system, might impair growth, development and body composition, and might account for many behavioral, endocrine, metabolic, cardiovascular, autoimmune, and allergic disorders.
Acute stress may trigger:

- Allergic manifestations, such as asthma, eczema or urticaria
- Angiokinetic phenomena, such as migraines, hypertensive or hypotensive attacks
- Pain (such as headaches, abdominal, pelvic and low-back pain),
- Gastrointestinal symptoms (pain, indigestion, diarrhea, constipation)
- Panic attacks and psychotic episodes
Chronic stress:

Neuropsychiatric manifestations: anxiety, depression, executive and/or cognitive dysfunction

Cardiovascular phenomena, such as hypertension; metabolic disorders, such as obesity, the metabolic syndrome, and type 2 diabetes mellitus; atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease

Neurovascular degenerative disease

Osteopenia and osteoporosis

Sleep disorders, such as insomnia or excessive daytime sleepiness
Hans Selye (1907–1982): Founder of the stress theory

Siang Yong Tan¹, MD, JD, A Yip², MS
The Three Stages of Selye’s General Adaptation Syndrome

Resistance: If the stressor continues, the body mobilizes to withstand the stress and return to normal.

Alarm: The body initially responds to a stressor with changes that lower resistance.

Stressor: The stressor may be threatening or exhilarating.

Homeostasis: The body systems maintain a stable and consistent (balanced) state.

Exhaustion: Ongoing, extreme stressors eventually deplete the body’s resources so we function at less than normal.

Illness and Death: The body’s resources are not replenished and/or additional stressors occur; the body suffers breakdowns.

Return to homeostasis

Illness

Death

INTERVENTIONS

FACETIME, ZOOM etc
Just say no to too much NEWS
Exercise
Phone calls
Distance dinners
Hobbies
Flowers? Groceries? Presents?
How about writing?
Dear Mrs. Dyer,

We would like to say “Thank you” for helping us and our families during these difficult times. We are extremely grateful that you thought of us. For this and so much more, we would like to say “thank you” from the bottom of our hearts.

Eva Gomez

[Signature]
What Can Be Done
Two Sides of the Same Coin

Social isolation/loneliness

Sense of purpose
The Positives Far Outweigh the Negatives

According to an HHS Aging Texas Well Advisory Committee recommendation to the HHS Commission (Draft)

Being engaged has a much stronger positive effect on health than social isolation/loneliness has a negative effect.
Pandemic Especially Hard on Active Older Adults

Many described losing their sense of purpose overnight

Volunteering  Senior Centers/Clubs  Everyday tasks
Pandemic Especially Hard on Active Older Adults

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Fighting on Two Fronts

Social distance ≠ physical distance

Recognizing risk without bubble wrapping older adults
Ideas from Around the Country

Quarantine quilts

Quarantine cookbooks

UnLonely Project
Stuck-at-Home Together Initiative

Photos from Wahpeton Daily News (ND); San Diego Union Tribune (CA)
Local Efforts to Combat Loneliness

Senior residential facility put out public plea for pen-pals to encourage resident engagement

Picture from KPRC Channel 2
Local Efforts to Combat Loneliness

Assisted living facility coordinated with community to create or donate flowers and cards for every resident.
Local Efforts to Combat Loneliness

YMCA offered online Bingo and other programs to encourage people to connect.

Courtesy of Elena Dinkin, YMCA Houston
Local Efforts to Combat Loneliness

When her fitness center closed, she offered open classes in front of her home, combining exercise and socialization.

Photo from the Bellaire Buzz
Local Efforts to Combat Loneliness

Montrose Center – weekly phone check-ins
Area Agency on Aging – congregate meal conference calls
Foster Grandparents – lunch with the Director
Houston Public Library and Easter Seals of Greater Houston – Get Connected efforts
UT Consortium on Aging – Crowdfunding for technology
While COVID-19 delayed its official opening, the Collaboratory for Aging Resources and Education (CARE) developed community materials and programs.

CARE created this flyer in response to social media posters asking how to help older loved ones and neighbors.
CARE’s Contributions

CARE partnered with Wesley Community Center to add items to their congregate meal participant care packages, such as a puzzle packet.

CARE also facilitated the donation of books from the Houston Public Library as well as a purchase of reduced-price colored pencils for art projects.
CARE’s Contributions

Adopt a Grandparent

◦ In partnership with Dr. Angela Goins at University of Houston-Downtown
◦ Recruited students and matched them with Harris County Foster Grandparent Program volunteers
◦ Dual purpose
  ◦ Reduce older adult loneliness
  ◦ Increase positive view of older adults among students
◦ Matches were random, but then – magic
  ◦ Student and older adult both raising an adopted 14-year-old girl sharing parenting tips and struggles
  ◦ Student who formerly worked for utility call center helping her grandparent with online bill pay and lowering her bill
  ◦ English as a Second Language student who lacked confidence in her speaking skills matched with a grandparent who immigrated to the U.S. who shared her own immigrant story of how she overcame obstacles
◦ Hope for future growth
Other Efforts

Please share other efforts you know of in the chat.
The risks of social isolation, American Psychological Association

community and social groups
book clubs or church groups have a lower risk of death.
connect to groups and communities that are meaningful to them.
Intergenerational housing programs
The risks of social isolation, American Psychological Association

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Thank You