



CCSMH

Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health

CCSMPA

Coalition canadienne pour la santé mentale des personnes âgées

Social Isolation & Loneliness in Older Adults Guidelines Project

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The Challenge

Tackling the Health Impacts of Social Isolation and Loneliness on Older Adults

- An Angus Reid survey found that 48% of Canadians reported themselves as being socially isolated, lonely, or both. (Reid, 2019)¹
- Loneliness and social isolation are associated with an increased risk of death. (26% and 29%, respectively) (CDC, 2021)²
- Social isolation among older adults is associated with increased chance of premature death; depression; dementia; disability from chronic diseases; poor mental health; increased use of health and support services; reduced quality of life; poor general health; and an increased number of falls. (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020)³
- The CCSMH has undertaken developing the **first clinical guidelines** addressing social isolation & loneliness.

The Opportunity

Strengthening the Relationship Between Older Adults and Health Care Providers

- “Family physicians and other primary care providers might be the only point of social contact for many older patients ... [J]ust as physicians screen for other risk factors, there might be **a role for primary care physicians to identify patients who are isolated, lonely, or socially vulnerable** and to recommend evidence-based interventions that could strengthen social connection” (Freedman and Nicolle, 2020)⁴
- “Although the health sector cannot solve this problem alone, **the medical community does need to respond**. Clinicians will require adequate training, resources, and support to integrate screening, interventions, and referrals for SIL into their existing responsibilities. **Patients' lives may hang in the balance**” (Holt-Lunstad, 2022)⁵

Summary of Draft Recommendations

Prevention:

- Clinicians should know and be able to identify **major risk factors** associated with social isolation & loneliness, and to **anticipate with their patients** possible changes in their life circumstances that could put them at risk of social isolation and loneliness.
- **Education** on SI&L should be part of the **curriculum** for health and social service students as well as practicing clinicians.

Screening and Assessment:

- Clinicians should **screen patients who show risk factors** for social isolation and loneliness (using appropriate tools).
- A thorough **clinical assessment** should aim to explore possible causes and identify any underlying health conditions that may be contributing.

Summary of Draft Recommendations

Management and Intervention:

- Clinicians should apply principles of **shared decision making** and an individualized approach to manage loneliness and social isolation.
- Interventions should take into account the **individual's culture** and recognize the **diversity of older adult populations**.

Possible Interventions May Include:

- Social activity
- Physical activity
- Social prescribing
- Psychological therapies

Defining Social Isolation & Loneliness: It's Complex.

Loneliness⁶

An internal subjective experience; it is an unpleasant sensation felt when a person's social relationships are lacking in quality and/or quantity compared to what they desire. A “subjective” assessment that social relationships are lacking.

Social Isolation⁶

A measurable deficiency in the number of social relationships that a person has. An objective deficit in connection to family, friends or the community.

Take Our Short Survey



References

1. Angus Reid Institute (June 2019). A portrait of social isolation and loneliness in Canada today.
2. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Loneliness and social isolation linked to serious health conditions.
3. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2020). Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System.
4. Freedman, A. & Nicolle, J. (2020). Social isolation and loneliness: The new geriatric giants: Approach for primary care. Canadian Family Physician, 66(3), 176–182.
5. Holt-Lunstad, J. (2022). Social Connection as a Public Health Issue: The Evidence and a Systemic Framework for Prioritizing the “Social” in Social Determinants of Health. Annual Review of Public Health 2022 43:1, 193–213
6. National Institute on Ageing. (June 2022). Understanding social isolation and loneliness in older Canadians and how to address it.

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