



Supporting **Your** Neighbours

*Would you know what to do if you thought
an older adult was socially isolated?*

A Community Conversation Guide

Canadian edition, November 2022



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SIIP SUPPORTING INCLUSION *through*
INTERGENERATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

RTOERO Foundation
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About the guide

About Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging

The [Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging \(RIA\)](#) is a charitable, non-profit foundation. As a non-profit organization, the RIA's mission is to enhance care and quality of life for older adults through partnerships in research, education and practice. The RIA supports research and explores aging across various topics, including dementia, technology, culture change, nutrition, heart health, and spirituality. We engage stakeholders throughout the research process, and use research findings to co-design resources, programs, education and training. Ultimately, we inform practice and policy change to enhance the quality of life and care for older adults everywhere.

About Supporting Inclusion through Intergenerational Partnerships

Supporting Inclusion through Intergenerational Partnerships (SIIP) is a 5-year (2019 - 2024) program at the RIA to promote social inclusion among community-dwelling older adults living with dementia, and their care partners, in Waterloo Region, Ontario.

About the RTOERO Foundation

The RTOERO Foundation was formed in 2011 by RTOERO (formerly the Retired Teachers of Ontario) members to raise and invest funds in research and programs that benefit Canada's aging population. The Foundation is among the few Canadian foundations focused exclusively on healthy and active aging. They invest strategically in three critical activities through their grant program:

- Research to better understand and address the complex needs of older adults.
- Post-secondary training in the field of geriatrics and gerontology.
- Innovative projects that promote social engagement.



Introduction

Many communities pride themselves on the connections and generosity of their citizens. Neighbours supporting neighbours.

But what happens when an older adult is less connected and unable to access the available community resources and supports?

From adult recreation centres, faith communities, senior association, emergency services, to hairdressers, bank tellers and grocery store clerks, we all have a role to play in supporting our community and making a difference in someone's life.

Everyone has a part to play in supporting their community and an opportunity to make a difference in someone's life, especially if that person has been struggling with social isolation.

This resource is for anyone who interacts with or knows an older adult who may be experiencing social isolation. In this document you will find information about:

- social isolation and its impacts,
- what to look out for in your neighbours,
- how to start a conversation with someone who may be experiencing social isolation,
- barriers to participation and ways to support,
- a worksheet to record community resources.

We welcome you to our network of neighbours supporting neighbours.

Would you know what to do if you thought an older adult was socially isolated?

“A lot of groups are trying really hard to do awareness and education about this. But again, it's tricky with the access to the right people who need it the most. And are those people connected with anyone at all that would be able to recognize the signs or not?”

- Community Member



What is social isolation?

Social isolation is an objective experience characterized by having a lack of meaningful communication or contact with others (*Keefe, Andrew, Fancey, & Hall, 2006; Wenger & Burholt, 2004*).

What is the value of a community approach?

One of the most effective ways to identify and support older adults who may be experiencing social isolation is through a community approach. When we work together, as a community, we may be able to help older adults who are experiencing social isolation, access important community supports and resources.

While older adults and care partners may have regular visits with health care professionals, there are many people in the broader community - family, friends, neighbours, community organizations such as adult recreation, faith communities, senior centres, emergency services, hairdressers, bank tellers and grocery store clerks - who are likely to come into contact with socially isolated older adults and can play a significant role in helping identify those in need of support and assistance.

“My father is still living at home. And my sister and I are his primary caregivers. And one of the biggest things that we’ve noticed is he’s becoming more and more isolated [...] even though we come as often as we can, there’s still things that are missing.”

- Community Member

These stories are designed to help you recognize when an older adult may be experiencing social isolation.

John's story:

John is a 98-year-old World War II veteran who lives on his own. Since his wife passed away three years ago, he has been slowly declining. He is having a harder time hearing, losing his ability to walk unassisted, and struggling to cook his own meals. He has no family in the area and he won't ask for help. He believes that if he were to call a service, he would lose his house and be forced to move into a long-term care home. He struggles with nightmares of the war and his mental health is declining.

You notice John at the local coffee shop and see that his clothes look unwashed and his coat is not on properly. John faces a variety of challenges that could be supported if he had help from someone in his community. You want to help support your neighbour, but don't know how.

Jan's story:

Jan, a grocery store clerk, is always happy to see her "regulars" and knows who comes to the store on which days for certain things. She notices that her favourite customer, Patricia, a 78-year-old, hasn't been coming in as often. She had a habit of coming regularly on Tuesdays for the senior's discount, but lately her visits have been more sporadic and when she does come in, her hair looks unwashed and she seems to have lost weight. Jan thinks something might be off with Patricia, although is unsure how to support her.

John and Jan may be experiencing social isolation.

This resource was built to help community members identify people who may be experiencing social isolation. In this guide you will find tools and strategies for opening a conversation with someone you think might be experiencing isolation and the resources available in your community.





Health impacts of social isolation

Experiencing social isolation may increase the severity of negative health outcomes and put added demand on health care services. Older adults who experience social isolation may have noticeable impacts on their physical, emotional, and mental health, and may need to access health services more often.

Physical health

Older adults who are socially isolated may experience:

- an increase in falls.
- cardiovascular disease.
- serious illnesses.
- functional decline.
- malnutrition.
- a greater likelihood of disability.

Mental health

Older adults who are socially isolated may experience:

- an increased risk of depression.
- an increased risk of dementia.
- decreased overall life satisfaction.
- elder abuse.

Note: Elder abuse can also lead to social isolation.

Health services

Older adults who are socially isolated may:

- experience a higher rate of emergency department visits.
- experience an increase in physician visits.
- be more likely to be readmitted to the hospital following a procedure or surgery.
- have an increased chance of admission into a long-term care home.
(Freedman & Nicolle, 2020).



Risk factors that may contribute to social isolation:

Older adults may be at a greater risk for social isolation if they:

- have experienced a recent or significant loss, such as the death of a spouse or care partner.
- have experienced sensory loss, such as hearing or vision.
- live in rural or isolated areas, such as on a rural farm or remote community.
- have health conditions that make them vulnerable or frail.
- have a small social circle.
- are over the age of 65.
- have mobility restrictions (e.g., use a walker or wheelchair to get around).
- have a language barrier, such as speaking a language other than what is common in the community, or is a recent immigrant.
- live alone or far from family.
- have a low income.
- are a care partner for someone.
- identify as part of an equity-deserving group (which may include women, racialized groups, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ2+ community).
- have mental health concerns, or cognitive or functional impairment.
- have experienced the loss of their driver's license.

(Australian Coalition to End Loneliness, 2017; Freedman & Nicolle, 2020; Medical Advisory Secretariat, 2008).

Signs to look out for

How do you identify an older adult who may be experiencing social isolation?

Being aware of the signs of social isolation can help you identify changes or important considerations for someone's well-being. Consider these questions:

- Have they disclosed feeling lonely or secluded?
- How is their hygiene? Do they have clean clothes on?
- Are they getting dressed? Or are they staying in the same clothes/pajamas for long periods of time?
- Where are they getting their meals?
- Are they eating enough, or do they have a lack of appetite?
- Is their driveway shoveled in the winter? Is their lawn mowed in the summer?
- Is their garbage out on the side of the curb on garbage day?
- Has a loved one passed away recently?
- Do they have family or friends nearby?
- Has their behaviour changed, or have they recently stopped going to social events they used to enjoy?
- Have they stopped attending church or faith groups that they used to belong to?
- Are they particularly chatty?
- Are they sleeping more than usual?
- Have they shown a decrease in physical activity?
- Do they show signs of depression or anxiety?
- Have they stopped calling the people they used to? Do they feel they have nothing to talk about with you?
- Are they more forgetful, or are they having a hard time remembering new information, or forgetting how to do a common task?
- Are they less attentive? Have they become more complacent?
- Have they lost interest in most things?

"I think the more guidance and the more people collaborating to help meet individuals to support, the better, especially right now..."

- Community Member



Barriers to participation and what to do about them

Sometimes older adults do not participate in their community because they face significant barriers, especially in rural settings. These barriers may include:

Transportation barriers

Transportation can be a major barrier for many older adults. People may have lost their license, live far away from services in rural communities, or weather conditions may prevent travel. When supporting an older adult, ask yourself these questions:

- Do they have a car or driver's license to get to programs or services?
- Is there public transit available?
- Are they mobile enough to use public transit? Is the bus stop accessible?
- Do they require mobility assistance, such as a cane, walker, scooter, or wheelchair?

You may be able to refer an older adult experiencing social isolation to services that assist in transportation or offer to drive them to the needed services. You could offer to pick up their groceries or encourage participation in online programs.

Organizations can offer support by having accessible entrances, virtual programming, or partnering with a transportation service for in-person participation.



Financial barriers

Some services may cost too much for someone on a limited income. Many older adults live on a set income. If this is a barrier that has been identified, ask yourself these questions:

- Are there income subsidies or free or low-cost programs available for the service or program?
- Are there volunteer based programs to help?
- Where can I go for additional information?

You can offer to look for support from local agencies on behalf of the older adult or contact **the local health and social services for additional support and resources.**

Some organizations may offer sliding scale payment systems, pro bono services for those in need, or connect with government supported payment systems.

Language barriers

Some individuals may become socially isolated if the language they speak differs from that in the broader community. Individuals may not feel confident if English or French is a second language.

- If English or French is their second language, are there services available in their preferred language either locally or virtually? Are there accessible English or French language classes available? Are translation services available?
- If you speak the same language, you can support older adults by offering companionship or helping to translate at doctor's appointments.
- Organizations can offer support by partnering with multicultural centres, translating their services in multiple languages or using a translation app to support clients.

Barriers experienced by equity-deserving groups

Some individuals become socially isolated because they do not feel included in their community. Groups of people who have been historically disadvantaged and underrepresented are called equity-deserving groups. These groups include but are not limited to: women, racialized groups, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQ2+ community.

- Organizations and individuals can become allies by making efforts to understand, uplift, empower, and support equity-deserving groups.
- Organizations should consider barriers that may be experienced by specific equity-deserving groups. Consider the following examples: if someone is new to Canada, do they need a health card to access the service? Is the location where the service or program is offered wheelchair accessible? Are there gender-neutral washrooms available?
- Organizations can partner with other community organizations that support or provide programming for equity-deserving groups. Organizations may also consider consulting with other resources, such as multicultural centres, to ensure they are offering inclusive programs and services.

Social barriers

It can be intimidating to start a new class or program on your own. In some cases, older adults may feel they don't belong at a program or club or have no one to go with. Older adults may feel like they are not welcome or like an outcast and may be reluctant to access a new program or service.

- Organizations can help create a warm welcome for older adults by offering tours of the space, checking-in with them throughout the program or service until they feel comfortable, and/or introducing them to another participant.
- You can offer support by being a friend and connecting for social visits, offering to attend programs with the older adult, or introducing them to others.

Did you know?

The UK created a Ministry of Loneliness to combat social isolation and loneliness. Campaigns to end loneliness and other strategies have been successful in Britain. To learn more, see: campaigntoendloneliness.org



Internet access

Older adults may not have the infrastructure or confidence to use the internet or may not have internet at all. Some may have the internet but are unsure how to use certain platforms or services available, or some older adults may fall victim to internet scams or fear these scams. In rural communities, internet access is not always reliable.

- You can support older adults by showing them how to use technology, and offering to set up a tool they want to use.
- Organizations can offer alternatives to online programs, such as a telephone program that older adults may feel more comfortable with.

“I think that isolation is probably something that we’ve all observed, but maybe don’t know what to do. And so it sounds really practical in terms of giving some strategies about how to actually do something.”

- Community Member



Fear

Some older adults may have fear relating to their current situation, about being perceived as a burden, or relating to accessing supports or services. These fears may prevent them from accessing the supports they need.

These fears need to be alleviated by having conversations or involving appropriate community supports, for example, an assessment by an occupational therapist, or physician regarding falls risks.

- In some cases, older adults may be worried about falling, resulting in a hesitancy to leave their home. It is important to speak with a healthcare professionals about ways to reduce the risk of falling.
- Some older adults may benefit from a tour of a retirement or long-term care community to help ease the stress associated with a possible move, ask questions, get information and address concerns.
- In some cases, older adults may benefit from letting them know they can stay in their home while also using services to help them stay healthy. These can include house cleaning, gardening, lawn services, personal support workers, and meal services. Emphasize that these services help them maintain their independence and will not take away from it.

Physical health status

Changes in physical health can lead to social isolation. Older adults may require additional help and support navigating services.

- Vision and hearing status may impact a person's ability to find and utilize services. If an older adult has a visual impairment reading a pamphlet may be challenging. If someone has a hearing impairment, it may be difficult to make an appointment or communicate well over the phone.
- Older adults experiencing visual and hearing impairments may require in-person visits or support to access services.
- Organizations can support by offering alternative formats of services (e.g., virtual or phone) and materials (e.g., large print, high contrast) for those who are visually or hearing impaired.

Other ways to support

Sometimes an older adult just needs someone to talk to or to feel that someone cares. In these cases, you may be able to go over for coffee and chat about something they care about.

Other times an older adult may need more support than what you alone can provide.

How individuals can help:

- Ask the older adult what type of help or support they need.
- Be a social companion/friend.
- Assist with certain tasks, such as shoveling or lawn-mowing.
- Offer to drive to appointments or other errands.
- Check-in with a visit or phone call on occasion.
- Do a grocery run or share a home-cooked meal.
- Go to a new club or program.
- Introduce them to new people.
- Make efforts to understand equity-deserving groups and how you can support and empower older adults who belong to equity-deserving groups.
- Contact appropriate services to help with their needs.
- Recommend a program or service.
- Connect with an older adult's caregivers or family and see how you may be able to support.





How organizations can help:

Organizations also have an opportunity to be part of the solution. Organizations can:

- Offer training to staff on social isolation and what to do if they see an older adult who may need support.
- Learn about other service providers in the community that offer supports to older adults for referrals and opportunities to collaborate.
- Make efforts to understand equity-deserving groups and how to support and empower older adults who belong to equity-deserving groups.
- Alter services to provide accommodations to those who need it.
- Contact service providers to follow up with older adults they identified as needing support.
- Check in on older adults in your organization.
 - Notice if your usual clients have been absent recently and reach out.
 - For senior living apartments or rental units: have a policy where superintendents, security, or building management reach out to check in on their residents.



How to create healthy boundaries

In some cases, building relationships and comfort with an older adult who is socially isolated may create a feeling of ease that can expand into dependence. Remember you can only help someone to the capacity you can carry. In instances where this may occur, creating healthy boundaries can help establish a better relationship with you and the older adult you are supporting.

- Let the older adult know when you have availability and will call/visit at a certain time. This will help them know when they can expect you.
- Be honest. If you cannot help with something, it is okay to communicate that. If you can, offer to call a service that can offer support.
- If the older adult comes to your workplace and wants to chat - this may be a sign they need the support of a resource or service within the community. You can ask if there are other friends and family they can visit during the day or use it as an opportunity to recommend a community program or resource they may like and enjoy.

Starting a conversation

When older adults are struggling, it is important to lead with empathy. Even well-meaning individuals can sometimes take the wrong approach when offering support. It is best to offer support that is specific, non-judgemental, and honours the person's individuality.

Asking an older adult if they think they are socially isolated can be upsetting and lead to further isolation. Try using terms like “social engagement”, “connection”, or “well-being” to ensure the older adult feels supported.

Use conversation starters to help initiate a conversation or offer support:

- “Hi, how are you doing? We had a (big snowfall/ton of leaves or weeds) and it took me and my (wife/husband/partner) forever to clear. Can I come by later to help with yours?”
- “I heard that your (wife/husband/spouse) passed away. I can't imagine how hard that is. I want you to know that I am here for you and will check in every now and then.”
- “Hi [name], I haven't seen you in a while. I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing?”
- “I know you've been supporting your dad recently, are you getting enough (sleep, support, time to yourself)?”
- “What can I do to help?”
- “I haven't seen your mother/father out. Is there anything that you think they might need?”

Initiate contact with a service or program

- “Have you heard of ... I think you might find them helpful for ...”
- “I just found out about this new service, I might try them out. Would you like their information/would you like to come with me?”
- “I got you this... I signed you up for this...” (This approach may be best suited for someone with a long-standing relationship, such as a daughter or son).
- “I am going to this new program, would you like to come with me?”

Community Resources

This section is intended to highlight the community supports and resources that may be available in your area. There is space to write down contacts for these local resources.

Emergency services:

For emergencies, call 9-1-1

Canadian Mental Health Association, call 1-844-HERE-247 (1-844-437-3247)
or 1-877-688-5501

Name:

Phone:

Notes:

Cultural and religious organization:

For example: churches, mosques

Name:

Phone:

Notes:

Friends and family:

Name:

Phone:

Notes:

Health, wellness, and safety:

For example: family, physician, counseling services, health centre

Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre hotline: 1.888.495.8501

Name:

Phone:

Notes:

Recreation:

For example: local library, senior centre, recreation centre

Name:

Phone:

Notes:

Transportation services:

For example: taxi, Uber, specialized transportation services for people with impaired mobility

Name:

Phone:

Notes:

[illegible]

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