In an age where communicating with a friend or family member on the other side of the country takes no more than a few clicks of a mouse, or a few taps on a cell phone screen, research indicates that we are, as a society, more lonely than we have ever been. Perhaps no other age group feels the keen sting of loneliness more than the elderly.

Secluded Seniors

Here are some of the more recent findings regarding loneliness and aging Americans:

- 18 percent of seniors live alone, while 43 percent report feeling lonely on a regular basis, according to a study conducted by researchers from the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF).
- Lonely seniors are more likely to decline and die faster. The aforementioned UCSF study also found that people 60-years-old and older who reported feeling lonely saw a 45 percent increase in their risk for death. Isolated elders also had a 59 percent greater risk of mental and physical decline than their more social counterparts.
- 1 in 7 people with Alzheimer’s disease live alone, according to a recently released report from the Alzheimer’s Association.
- Loneliness is contagious. Older adults who feel lonely are more prone to behave in ways that may cause other people to not want to be around them. Psychologists from the University of Chicago who analyzed data from the Farmingham Heart Study, a long-term, ongoing cardiovascular study, found that solitary seniors have a tendency to further isolate themselves by pushing people away and not making efforts to engage with others.

Two-thirds of the older adults in the UCSF study who said that they were lonely were either married or living with a partner of some kind. This finding lends credence to the belief that it’s not about how many relationships you have—it’s about how meaningful they are.

Why are Older Adults so Lonely?

“They are lonely because they are alone,” is the frank response of T. Byram Karasu, M.D., chair of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. “They [seniors] are put in nursing homes, assisted living communities, etc. Those are totally disorienting experiences.”

Even when they’re being taken care of by family caregivers, Karasu says that there is often little attention paid to deep, engaging communication between a senior and the rest of the family.

Bobbie Smith, a professional caregiver for Home Instead Senior Care, who has more than six decades worth of experience taking care of the elderly under her belt, echoes this sentiment. She says that the modern trend of the breakdown of family relationships—like those between grandparent and grandchild—has caused many elderly people to feel as though they have been “pushed to the side,” and forgotten about.

The Caregiver: A Senior’s Link to the Outside World

Smith, winner of Home Instead’s 2012 CAREGiver of the Year Award, feels optimistic that there are
many things that can be done to rectify this situation. “It’s so easy to combat loneliness in the elderly. But caregivers have to be willing to get up and make it happen,” she says.

Here are a few ways you can help alleviate loneliness in your elderly loved one:

1. **Listen and Observe.** “We often don’t listen enough to the people we love,” laments Tina Tessina, Ph.D., psychotherapist and author of “The Ten Smartest Decisions a Woman Can Make After Forty.” According to Tessina, “saying ‘tell me more’ is a gift you can give from your heart.” Encouraging a senior to express themselves can help you discover what interests and passions lay dormant, just waiting to be rekindled in your loved one. “You’ve got to really dig deep and find out what their interests were before and get them to try and awaken those forgotten activities,” Smith says.

2. **Develop a Strategy to Defeat Seclusion.** Once you know what your loved one loves to do, you can use this information to develop a personalized loneliness eradication plan for them. Smith cites several simple examples from her own experiences as a caregiver: While caring for an elderly couple who refused to leave their house, Smith found out that they loved to cook and garden. So, she asked what the couple’s favorite meals were, cooked them and invited a few people they trusted over to the house for a dinner party. Also, because neither spouse could go outside to garden, Smith brought the flora inside and helped them rediscover the extensive collection of gardening manuals that they had forgotten about. While caring for an angry 91-year-old man who was reluctant to communicate, Smith discovered that he had a passion for singing and photography. Walking down the hall with him one day, she began to belt out a few bars of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.” The man responded by singing right along with her and grudgingly admitting, “You’re OK.” Today, he sings for the community and is part of a club of retired photographers that Smith helped him contact.

3. **Let Them Teach You.** Smith encourages caregivers to connect with their loved ones by allowing them to pass a portion of their vast store of hard-earned knowledge on to you. “I learn something new every day because I am being taught by the best,” she says. The key is to let the senior’s passions guide the lesson plan. For example, if you’re caring for your mother who loves to embroider, ask her to teach you how to do it. This not only has the potential to be a great bonding experience, it also can help add a bit of balance to the child-parent dynamic that may have been upended when you started caring for her.

4. **Bridge the Generation Gap.** According to Smith, caregivers can play a vital role in fostering a relationship between a senior and their youngest relatives. Too often, she says that grandkids see their grandparents as either crazy or boring, when they should be viewing their elders as sources of wisdom. Try to come up with ways to help the oldest and the youngest generations of your family to spend time together. “That’s an absence in so many elderly homes. They need to share stories. There’s a wealth of knowledge that can be passed on to the younger generation,” Smith says. Karasu also points out that seniors have the potential to contribute a lot to their families—if they are allowed to remain engaged. He says this is doubly important in light of the fact that research has shown that an unengaged elderly adult will experience cognitive decline at a much faster rate than a senior who is mentally stimulated by interactions with other people.

5. **It’s the Thought that Counts.** Another piece of advice from the pros: urge other family members to reach out to an elderly loved one. It doesn’t have to be a grand, time-consuming gesture.
thing as simple as sending a card, dropping off a little present of their favorite food, or calling for 30 minutes a couple of times a week can go a long way to making a senior feel loved and connected to the rest of the family.

Taking steps to make your elderly loved one less lonely could not only help them live longer, Smith says that, based on her personal experiences, it may make their eventual passing a bit easier. “When the elderly get re-acquainted with family members, it makes dying a bit easier for them,” she says.