

# Talking Points on Social Engagement for the Aging Network

Research has shed light on the impact social isolation and loneliness have on individuals and communities. As you meet with partners and potential partners, you may wish to use these talking points to make the case for the importance of developing social engagement programs. The information in this document also offers background information and statistics you can use as you prepare proposals to secure funding for your social engagement programs.

## What is social isolation and loneliness?

- Social isolation is the objective physical separation from others (NIA, 2019) and is commonly described as a quantifiable lack of relationships or infrequent social contact.
- Loneliness is the subjective feeling or perception of being alone (NIA, 2019).

## Individuals experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation:

- Experience an increased risk of developing coronary heart disease or stroke (Valtorta et al., 2016a).
- Experience an increased risk of mortality from all causes (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017).
- Experience higher rates of mental health conditions like depression and anxiety (Beutel et al., 2017).
- Cost Medicare an estimated \$134 more per person monthly (\$1,608 annually), compared to individuals who are not socially isolated. In total, the study estimated that a lack of social contact among older adults is associated with an estimated \$6.7 billion in additional Medicare spending annually (AARP Public Policy Institute, Stanford University & Harvard University, 2017).



## Social isolation and loneliness continued to be critical issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasis on addressing and preventing both will continue as the pandemic evolves. Data collected during the pandemic found:

- In June 2020, 56 percent of older adults reported feeling isolated from others compared to 27 percent in 2018 (National Poll on Healthy Aging, 2020).
- When comparing feelings to before the pandemic, 48 percent of older adults reported feeling more isolated during the pandemic (National Poll on Healthy Aging, 2020).
- In June 2020, 46 percent of older adults reported infrequent social contact compared to 28 percent in 2018 (National Poll on Healthy Aging, 2020).

Use the **UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale** (found online at [www.engagingolderadults.org/engagedcommunitytoolkit](http://www.engagingolderadults.org/engagedcommunitytoolkit)) and other measurement tools to assess levels of social isolation and loneliness.

**Social engagement is one solution to address and prevent social isolation and loneliness. Social engagement can help improve quality of life, resulting in health benefits, including:**

- Greater likelihood of survival (**Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010**).
- Decreased risk of disability in activities of daily living, mobility and instrumental activities of daily living (**James et al., 2011**).
- Decreased likelihood of depression (**Golden et al., 2009**).
- Better cognitive function (**Krueger et al., 2009**).

**Opportunities for engagement, both in person and virtually, include:**

- Volunteering for an organization, whether it's a local club, a nonprofit organization, a faith community or another type of initiative.
- Rekindling creative talents or learning new ones by taking art classes, learning an instrument or singing in a choir.
- Participating in intergenerational opportunities to support youth, such as mentoring or tutoring programs.
- Taking lifelong learning courses, educational classes or technology training at a senior center, local college or university.
- Participating in health and wellness classes within the community.
- Using technology to connect to friends and family.
- Seeking employment opportunities or developing entrepreneurial skills.

While many Aging Network programs and services provide opportunities for social engagement, **engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults** is leading a national effort to increase the number of older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers who are actively engaged in their communities. The goal of engAGED is to increase awareness and build partnerships with a variety of organizations to help promote understanding of the issues, reflect appropriate cultural perspectives, and provide resources, best practices and strategies for the Aging Network to support programs and services that increase social engagement of older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers.



To help the Aging Network develop and implement social engagement programs, engAGED developed the Social Engagement Innovations Hub. Searchable by a variety of filters, the Innovations Hub gives organizations access to replicable programs they can use to increase social engagement of older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers. Learn more about the Innovations Hub and other engAGED resources at [www.engagingolderadults.org](http://www.engagingolderadults.org).

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