Why social interaction can be beneficial to the elderly

Written by Stephen Kellie

According to a national survey of the 45+ population of the USA commissioned by AARP to examine the issues of loneliness and social isolation among older adults, 25 per cent of respondents aged 70 years old and older admitted to being lonely. Those who reported feelings of loneliness were also found to be less likely to be involved in activities such as volunteering, attending religious services, participating in events held by a community organisation or enjoying a hobby—all related with building social networks.

In a separate study carried out by the University of California, San Francisco, those involved in a survey who were 60 years old or older who said they felt lonely also encountered a 59 per cent greater risk of mental and physical decline, as well as a 45 per cent increase in the risk of death, when compared to respondents who were more social.

It provides improved quality of life

A mere one hour per week of social interaction can improve the lives of elderly people who suffer from dementia and live in nursing homes, research has found. Key care home staff were trained to deliver person-centred care such as providing residents one-to-one time and talking to residents about their interests in one study. The scheme improved quality of life and reduced agitated and aggressive behaviour amongst dementia sufferers. It was also noticed that patients did not need as much antipsychotic medicine as they were more relaxed.

Taking inspiration from those across the Atlantic in the UK, a neighbourhood befriending scheme is offered to the elderly and physically disabled by the charity Impetus. Volunteers throughout the nation take the time to visit citizens who are prone to social exclusion. They discovered that 54% of people felt more connected by participating in the scheme and 42% felt less depressed.

A more positive outlook on life is witnessed by individuals who engage in activities with family and friends on frequent occasions, or at least have a reliable form of contact, when compared to those who don't. One telephone befriending service encourages volunteers to phone an older person on a regular basis to stimulate conversation. Many positives have come from the scheme, including the alleviation of loneliness and anxiety, greater confidence in the person who is receiving the calls and the reassurance that there is a friend out there.

The health benefits of social interaction

Interacting and socialising with other individuals can provide various health benefits to older members of our society. As we're aware, memory loss and confusion are common amongst the older generation as dementia and Alzheimer's become more of a threat. When older people are experiencing loneliness, they are then at a higher risk of cognitive decline. In fact, one study concluded that lonely people have a 64% increased chance of developing clinical dementia. Unfortunately, depression and anxiety often soon follow a dementia diagnosis. If this can be deterred, it can improve overall health.

We shouldn't just be thinking about the positive effects that interaction with humans can have for the elderly though. Scientists have known for many years that owning a pet brings a range of health benefits. These include lower blood pressure, cholesterol levels and feelings of loneliness, as well as greater exposure to exercising and socialising opportunities.

Research has also suggested that those with pets recover from both illness and surgery quicker, not to mention visiting their doctor less often. Understandably, some older people are not capable of caring for an animal full-time, but there are some ways that they can benefit from pet therapy. In some social schemes, an animal is introduced into a care home so that the residents can interact with them and form companionship.

A person who rates highly when it comes to their social wellbeing were seen to have lower levels of interleukin-6 too. This is an inflammatory factor which has been found to cause age-related disorders such as Alzheimer's disease, osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis, cardiovascular disease and some cancer types. The Alzheimer's Society also raised the concern that those who are not socially active will not have as high sleep quality as those who are more sociable. A lack of a good quality sleep in elderly people has been found to contribute to memory loss.

Understanding the schemes available

We have established that loneliness is still a big issue across the US. However, there are some programmes that are addressing the issue. Professor Mima Cattan, who specialises in research around loneliness in older people, said that the following types of activities are the most effective loneliness interventions:

- Group-based and targeted at a specific group
- Focused on a shared interest or with an educational focus
- Involves older people in running the group

Intergenerational care is one innovation. In Singapore, plans are in place to co-locate childcare facilities and senior centres under one roof. Ten new projects are in the pipeline to be rolled out in the next decade and the aim is to encourage bonding across different ages and help Singaporeans age confidently.

Similar initiatives are being seen throughout the US. One in particular is located in the campus of Providence Mount St Vincent, a care home for more than 400 older people in Seattle. But it also doubles as a nursery for children aged from six weeks to five years. On a regular basis, the children visit the residents and vice-versa, both enjoying similar activities such as singing, arts and crafts, and cooking. The elderly people feel joy when they see the younger children and feel that they have more of a purpose — simultaneously, the children can learn lots of things from the residents too.

Then there's the community wellbeing project that is being undertaken in the English borough of Halton. This involves Community Wellbeing Officers, who provide one-to-one sessions to those who are most at risk of loneliness. Together, they discuss an individual's wellbeing and create a plan of action as to how issues can be tackled. This could be by signing up to some social activities or a befriending scheme. Results have shown that 64% of participants improved their wellbeing levels after an intervention and 55% reported a reduction in depression levels.

Remaining in Europe, a programme is also being run in a Dutch nursing home where university students are offered free rent if they neighbour older citizens. The students volunteer their time with the resident to teach them new skills such as emailing and Skype. There is a similar scheme in Finland too where people under the age of 25 are offered cheap accommodation inside elderly care homes for one year if they give some time to their neighbours. Both these schemes have created mutually beneficial programmes for younger and older people to solve issues such as high rent and loneliness.

There's no doubting that social inclusion can provide elderly citizens with so many benefits when it relates to their health and wellbeing. With an improved quality of life and a lower reliance on the health system, tackling loneliness should be high on any government's agenda.

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