Social Isolation & Loneliness: Relationships to Health and a Call to Action

Matthew Pantell, MD, MS
University of California, San Francisco
Center for Health and Community
Social Interventions Research and Evaluation Network
Definitions

- Social isolation
  - The objective lack of (or limited) social contact with others

- Loneliness
  - The perception of social isolation or the subjective feeling of being lonely

- One can be lonely even if not socially isolated, and vice versa

- Distinct concepts with implications for interventions
Social Isolation and Mortality among Women

Social Isolation is an Equally Strong Risk Factor as Traditional Clinical Risk Factors

Women

Men

Adjustments: Age, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status

* P < 0.05

Inflammation and Immunology

- Loneliness is associated with
  - Altered genome transcriptional activity
    - Under-expression of genes promoting anti-inflammatory response
    - Over-expression of genes promoting pro-inflammatory receptors

- Social isolation is associated with
  - Increased levels of C-reactive protein
    - A marker for inflammation associated with cardiovascular disease
  - Increased susceptibility to the common cold

Populations with Increased Risk

- NASEM 2020 Report¹
  - Certain immigrant communities
  - LGB individuals
  - People living with chronic diseases
  - People who have experienced hearing loss

- Tung et al.²
  - People experiencing financial strain
  - People experiencing intimate partner violence

- Understudied population: youth and young adults

---

Endorsement of Screening

National Academy of Medicine, 2014

NASEM, 2020
Goal 1: Develop a more robust evidence base

Goal 2: Translate current research into health care practices

Goal 3: Improve awareness of the health and medical impact of social isolation and loneliness across the health care workforce and among members of the public

Goal 4: Strengthen ongoing education and training related to social isolation and loneliness in older adults for the health care workforce

Goal 5: Strengthen ties b/w the health care system and community-based networks and resources
Lessons Learned from National and International Stakeholders

- Social isolation and loneliness are cross-sectoral issues
- The health care system should be proactive rather than reactive
- Enthusiasm for government involvement and accountability
- Increasing recognition of the importance of social isolation and loneliness to health care plans
Recommendations During the COVID-19 Era

- Maintain social contact – physical vs. social distancing
- Support those unfamiliar with ways to connect through technology
- Initiate new connections
- Know when to ask for help
- Providers should screen for social isolation and loneliness and refer patients to appropriate resources
Acknowledgments
- The Commonwealth Fund
- The Alliance for Health Policy
- The NIHCM Foundation

Matt.Pantell@ucsf.edu
sirenetwork.ucsf.edu
https://profiles.ucsf.edu/matt.pantell
@MatthewPantell