

Gerontologists tackle social isolation, increasingly a public health concern

March 12 2018, by Todd Kluss

Social connectivity and meaningful social engagement must be promoted as integral components of healthy aging, according to a new collection of articles in the latest issue of *Public Policy & Aging Report (PP&AR)* from The Gerontological Society of America (GSA). Several authors also detail a series of initiatives that, if replicated, hold promise for decreasing isolation among older adults.

More than 8 million people over age 50 are socially isolated. That means they may not have the support of a social network of friends, family, or community. The toll on their health can be devastating: social isolation has been linked to higher blood pressure, increased susceptibility to the flu and other infectious diseases, greater risk of heart disease, and earlier onset of dementia.

"As we age, [social connections](#) can be an important contributor to our well-being," said GSA Executive Director and CEO James Appleby, BSPHarm, MPH. "Now through our *Public Policy & Aging Report*, I am proud that GSA is adding momentum to research in this topic area—ultimately leading to new evidence-based insights that can be translated into sound policy and practice."

Appleby sits on the Executive Council of Connect2Affect, an initiative led by AARP Foundation that is committed to helping end isolation and build the social connections that [older adults](#) need to thrive.

Lisa Marsh Ryerson, president of AARP Foundation, contributed the

first article to the PP&AR's lineup. In addition to describing the efforts of Connect2Affect, she reports on several new ventures underway at the Foundation.

One involves a collaboration with the USC Center for Body Computing, with generous support from UnitedHealthcare, to study whether providing free Lyft rides to medical and non-medical appointments can improve health and well-being in older adults. A second involves testing whether an interactive device with built-in speech recognition and the ability to provide voice responses will make it easy, fast, and fun for older adults to get reminders and community information, and to discover and deepen new relationships. The Foundation is also supporting a project that evaluates the effectiveness of phone-based outreach in reducing feelings of loneliness and the incidence of poor health among low-income older adults.

A subsequent article by Julianne Holt-Lunstand, PhD, of Brigham Young University, demonstrates the need for such innovations. She concludes that there is now substantial evidence that being socially connected significantly reduces the risk for premature mortality, and that lacking [social connectedness](#) significantly increases risk. Moreover, these risks exceed those associated with many risk factors that receive substantial public health resources: obesity, air pollution, smoking, and physical inactivity.

The new issue of PP&AR, which contains 10 articles and an opening editorial, is titled "Lack of Social Connectedness and Its Consequences" and can be accessed at academic.oup.com/ppar/issue/27/4.

Provided by The Gerontological Society of America

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