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Participation in Online Communities & Psychosocial Well-Being Among Older Adults

Social Isolation as a Public Health Problem

Brought to you by Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging

Participation in Online Communities & Psychosocial Well-Being Among Older Adults

Keeping to oneself. Retreating from or shunning society. Preferring alone time—all the time. Within the older adult population, social isolation is a common occurrence—and it means more than just an empty calendar, void of social engagements or plans.

Extensive research shows that there is a strong relationship between social isolation and health—specifically that socially isolated individuals have more health problems and consequently, consume more health care resources than socially active individuals. In addition, findings indicate that socially isolated, ill individuals have worse outcomes from acute surgical procedures, and numerous studies have demonstrated a positive association between social isolation and mental illness—including depression, distress, and dementia.

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THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Social engagement—defined by some researchers as *making social and emotional connections with people and the community*—has been shown to contribute to the successful aging of older adults. Specifically, it has been shown that social engagement is the primary driver of improved psychological well-being in older adults and provides them with resources to cope with the common health problems and life changes associated with aging. Some documented benefits include: decreased rates of mortality, reduced functional decline, increased happiness and improved quality of life, and reduced risk of cognitive impairment. Aspects of social connectedness such as integration within dense social networks may also promote healthy behaviors, resulting in better health outcomes for socially connected individuals.

THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

As the proportion of individuals currently online has increased, so has research examining how these new forms of communication affect social support and psychosocial well-being. In 2011, The Pew Research Center found that 52 percent of older adults aged 50 to 64 use the Internet daily to search for information, while 37 percent of older adults aged 65 and better search online daily. A large number—51 percent—of older adults aged 50 to 64 use social networking sites, and 33 percent of older adults aged 65 and better use them. Sixty-one percent of older adults aged 50 to 64 use e-mail, while 46 percent of older adults aged 65 and better use it.

These statistics are important to the study of social isolation because the impact of increasing use of the Internet and social media sites can be straightforwardly documented over an ongoing period of time. And the trend indicates that many older adults are currently—and will be—making the leap to Facebook, Twitter, and online forums.

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What does this mean for socially isolated individuals? Studies indicate that among older adults, using the Internet (in general) yields positive experiences—contact with friends and family, a greater sense of community, and attendance at social gatherings—and this contact can lead to more social engagement. A related study found that using the Internet as a communication tool is associated with decreased social loneliness if interactions are between existing contacts.

Older adults may be particularly vulnerable to social isolation and diminished social networks due to lifestyle adjustment (going from work to retirement); loss of a spouse; or an onset of illnesses which limit social participation.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES AS PUBLIC HEALTH INTERVENTIONS

It's been found that older adults who have one or more disabilities, are living with a chronic disease, or are socially isolated are least likely to use the Internet, **however**, a number of studies suggest that it is possible to reach these subsets of the older adult population with Internet-based interventions.

One example examined the effects of a web-based intervention on psychosocial well-being among older adults with diabetes (aged 60 and better). Findings were very positive, with the intervention group showing significant improvement on quality of life, depression, social support, and self-efficacy. Another study found that homebound and disabled older adults who participated in an online community designed for their use significantly increased satisfaction in the amount of contact with others. Similarly, physically frail elders participating in an Internet-based intervention to help them monitor self-care needs reported feeling more connected to friends and family and less socially isolated as a result of their computer use.

Lastly, there is evidence that Internet-based interventions can improve social well-being even among those in poor health with limited or no computer experience. In a study among individuals in congregate housing and nursing facilities, researchers demonstrated that Internet training and access improved psychosocial outcomes even though 69 percent of the participants had no previous experience with computers. Notably, 60 percent of individuals were still using the Internet on at least a weekly basis at the conclusion of the study.

The positive findings from these studies—along with trends of increasing use among older adults overall—suggest that the Internet may be a promising component to increasing psychosocial well-being among diverse groups of older adults.

*Mather LifeWays is a unique nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well.SM Learn more about our award-winning research at Mather LifeWays **Institute on Aging**, our **senior living residences**, and our **community initiatives**.*

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