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An Underlying Epidemic: Combating Loneliness During COVID-19

On the eve of April 14, 1912, the Titanic smashed into the infamous iceberg which sunk the ship to the bottom of the ocean. When the crew saw the iceberg, it appeared tiny, only about 100 feet of ice was bobbing above the Atlantic Ocean. What they did not see was the additional 1,700 feet of ice that lurked underneath the surface of the water. It is this part of the iceberg which scraped across the side of the Titanic and flooded the ship.

It is what lies underneath the surface – that which cannot be seen by

the naked eye – that can be our undoing. Despite the fact that we live in an interconnected world, research has concluded that society is growing increasingly lonely. According to AARP, social isolation in elderly communities has reached epidemic proportions. Just because this is not a disease which is outwardly evident, does not mean it is unimpactful. Being alone has been shown to effect one's physical and emotional wellbeing, and it is estimated that 26% of people are at an increased risk of early death because of loneliness.

COVID-19 has only exasperated this loneliness, as people are forced to physically separate from one another to slow the spread of the virus. Seniors in nursing homes and retirement communities have particularly become secluded without in-person visitors or activities. While many have done their best to keep their loved ones engaged, loneliness can be an overwhelming and monumental obstacle to overcome.

Here are a few things to try that might comfort elders and alleviate the loneliness they are experiencing:

Call frequently: In lieu of visiting in-person, take the time to call or video chat with those in isolation, and encourage family members or old friends to do the same. If you are able, schedule a time to talk each week so that your loved one has something to look forward to. If you feel particularly ambitious, you could try to arrange a call with multiple people – get the whole family together for a virtual reunion or assemble a number of the seniors’ friends for an evening. While it may seem like a small part of your day, it very well could be the most important part of theirs.

Write cards and letters: If your elders prefer a non-digital form of communication, the U.S. postal service is still operating like a well-oiled machine. A ‘thinking of you’ card can go a long way to someone who feels separated from the rest of the world. Another creative endeavor is to sign up seniors for letter-writing campaigns to veterans, prisoners, or charities. This is a great non-contact way for those in isolation to interact with someone new and make a difference.

Send care packages: Everyone appreciates receiving a package filled with heartfelt, meaningful goodies: homemade desserts, candy, artwork, pictures, teddy bears, and more (your options are quite endless). You could even make this a family project and have everyone contribute one item to

the box. Research has demonstrated that care packages help maintain relationships over far distances, improving health and wellbeing.

Listen to music:

Numerous studies have shown that music positively impacts the brain – it reduces stress, eases pain, improves memory, and provides comfort. Radio stations, YouTube, and music streaming apps offer a bountiful selection of genres, and they are fairly easy to set up by an external party. You could even assemble several playlists with your senior’s favorite songs.

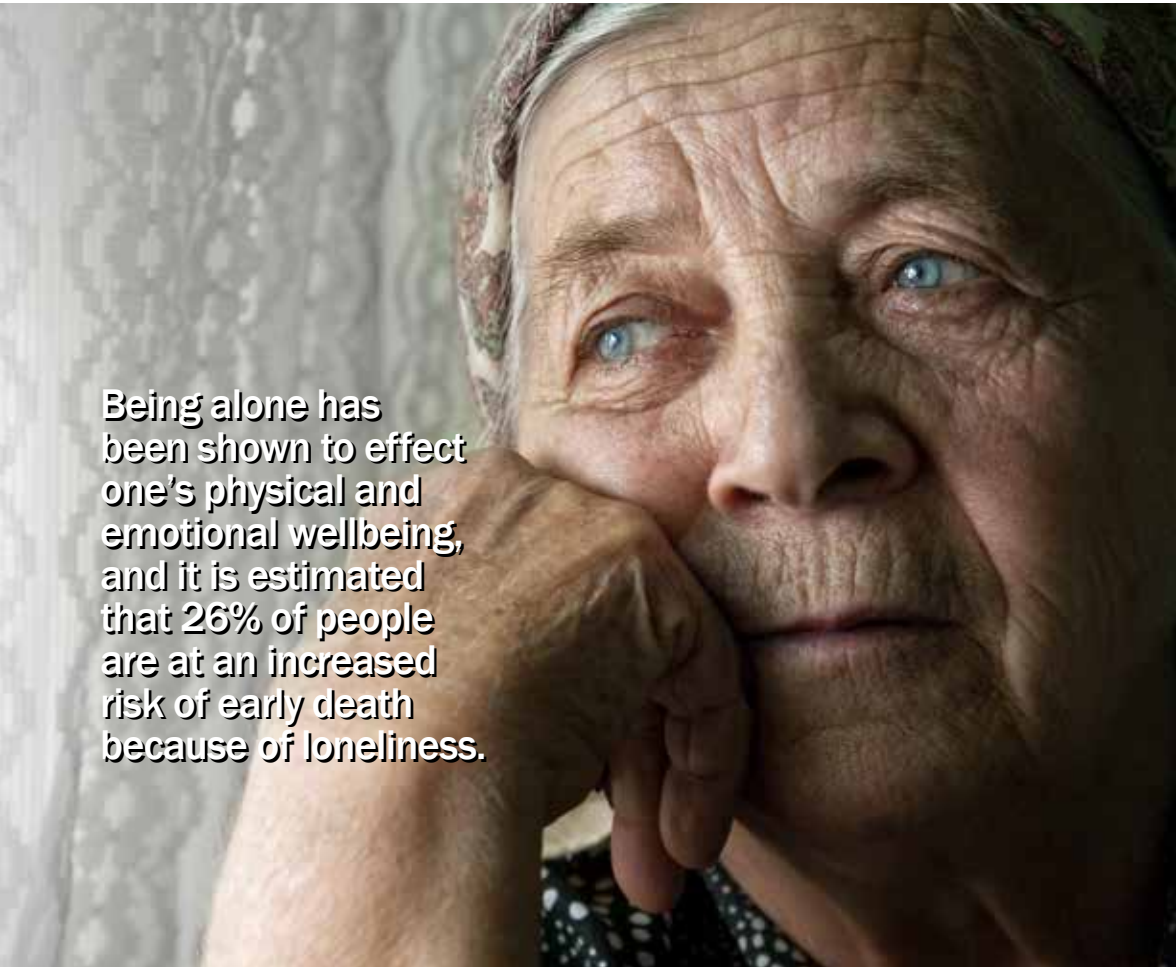
Enjoy a podcast:

For some seniors, podcasts may be a completely new realm to dive into, but one they will hopefully find worthwhile. Similar to music, listening to a podcast is a type of audio therapy, and it stimulates the brain in new ways. The other benefit of podcasts is that one can listen to almost any type of story: a news report, a murder mystery, a motivational speaker. The options are limitless. It is also easy to send the names or links of podcasts so that your senior simply has to press the play button.

Stick to a routine:

One of the most taxing parts of being isolated is the accompanying uncertainty. Instead of worrying about what is coming next, therapists have encouraged seniors to find and stick to a routine. Psychologically, completing a routine help us remain centered and grounded to reality. Completing even a few simple tasks every day will help give each day





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a purpose, distracting one from their loneliness.

Participate in an online adventure: For those who are more comfortable with technology, the internet is an avenue to all sorts of interactive and stimulating ventures. Seniors could take a class, complete a jigsaw puzzle, read a book, or take a tour of a European village. Even if isolated individuals cannot physically leave their room, technology has the power to transport them anywhere. This liberating sensation just may help alleviate the loneliness they are experiencing.

While nothing can replace being psychically together, hopefully these are some fun ways to remain connected during this difficult time. Most importantly, you know your loved ones best. What are some of their favorite things

to do and how can you translate that experience remotely?

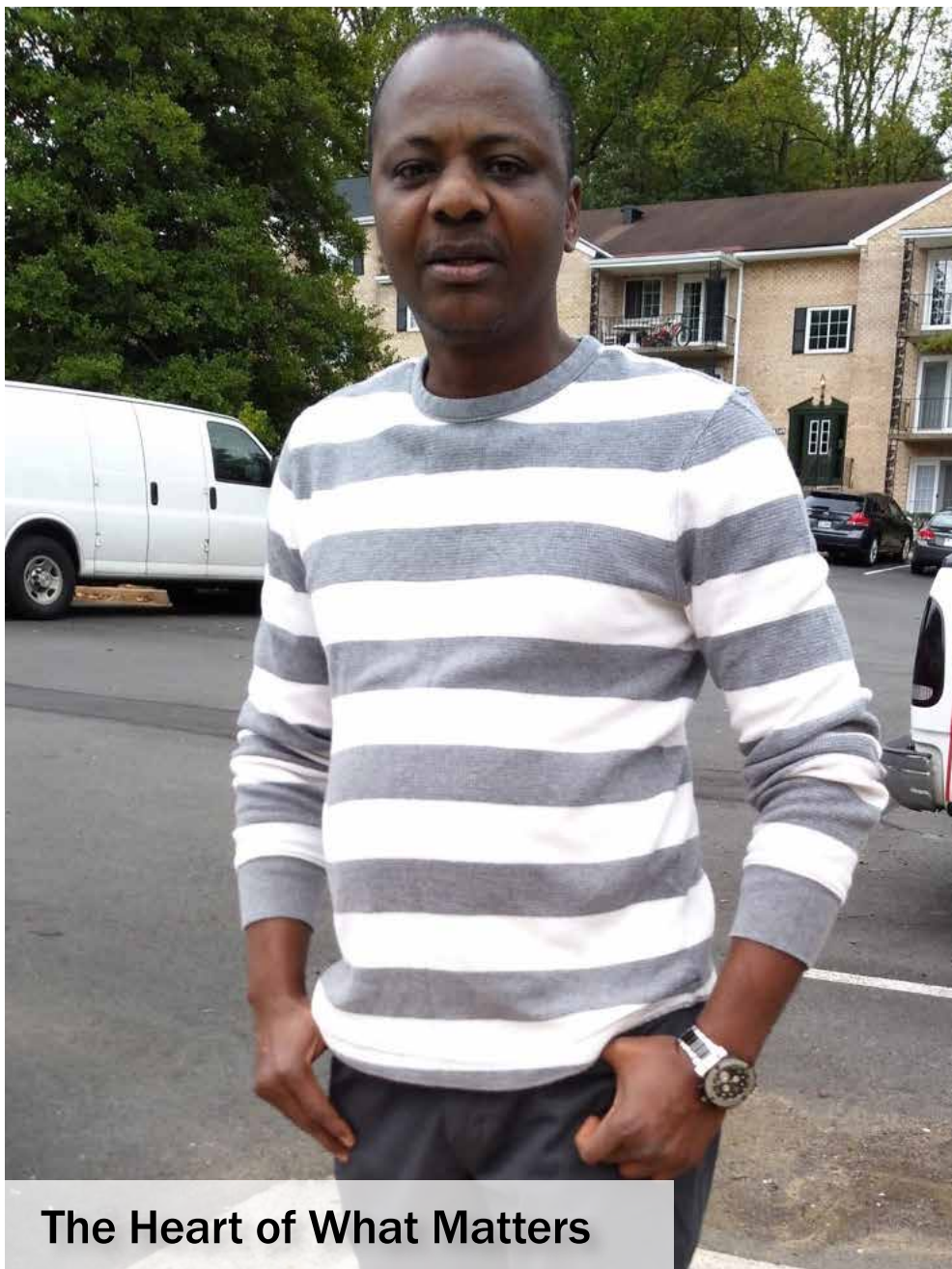
In the face of COVID-19, it can be easy to overlook the loneliness lingering under the surface. At the same time, it is our collective responsibility to be proactive in helping seniors combat this epidemic and maintain their quality of life.

SOURCES

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The Heart of What Matters

Plastered across billboards and yard signs are messages of gratitude to frontline workers. Day after day, there are the doctors, nurses, EMTs, sanitization teams, caregivers, and more who work unceasingly to care for those battling COVID-19. Among these brave souls is Abdulai Jalloh, a caregiver for Independent You.

This summer, Abdulai nobly stepped up to care for clients who

tested positive with COVID-19.

According to him, caregiving goes beyond a virus.

“You cannot deny someone help because of their health or this virus,” he told me. “They have helped others before, and now they are the ones who need our help.”

Abdulai recalled his thought process when first asked if he was willing to care of COVID-positive patients. He called two of his friends, both of

whom advised him against the task out of concern for his own safety. But after consideration, Abdulai decided it was the least he could do.

“I sat down and thought, if no one else is going to help them, then I have to,” he insisted.

For two weeks, it was merely himself and the patient in the same space. He spent his days cooking and cleaning, but also made it a priority to connect with the COVID-positive client at any possible chance.

“They need someone to be around them, to comfort them,” he explained.

He reminisced on their time spent regaling one another with stories from their youth, sharing their family’s history, or watching television together. Abdulai understood that this disease isolates people from their support network, so he did all he could to be a friend for this patient, someone in whom they could confide.

Moreover, for Abdulai, this was simply another part of his duty as a caregiver.

“A lot of caregivers deny cases because they don’t feel comfortable with this or that, but your job as a caregiver is to go and help,” he proclaimed. “Sometimes it can be hard at first, but once you get used to it, you learn to like it.”

Abdulai understands his caregiving to be an entirely selfless profession, something that goes beyond a way to

make a living. He describes how we each have a role in the greater circle of life, wherein we will be the ones to help and the ones who need help.

“All people need help, especially old people,” he stated. “My mom is not here, and she needed help...I’m going to get old and someone will need to take care of me.”

His disposition is simple: do not deny anybody the care they deserve. Instead, go and help them.

In return, Abdulai asks for very little, as he lives a humble lifestyle. Outside of work he spends his days shopping for groceries, doing laundry, and cooking traditional African food. One of his treasured pastimes was playing soccer with his friends and traveling to soccer matches. While he has not dusted off his cleats in years, he

remains active through daily walks.

Abdulai did not agree to care for COVID-positive clients because it was easy or because it was mandated of him. He did it because it was the right thing to do.

The golden rule dictates that we must treat others as we want to be treated. There is no one who exemplifies this more than Abdulai, who put his own health on the line for a total stranger. He and his actions are at the heart of caregiving. His bravery reminds us what really matters – now more than ever – is caring for one another.



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The Upside of COVID-19

By Alex Budzynski

At merely one-millionth of an inch long, viruses are one of the smallest organisms known to man. And yet, in a matter of months, a microscopic particle that is 1000 times smaller than a human cell has managed to dramatically alter the way we live and think.

As we navigate these uncharted waters, it can seem impossible to find a silver lining. COVID-19 has impacted us each in unique ways, but I guarantee we have all lost something in this battle. Perhaps we know a relative or close family friend who has passed away, or someone who has lost their job in the past few months. Personally, I have had to evacuate my college campus and continue to be separated from my friends and education.

Now more than ever, it seems so easy to fixate on that which we have no longer have, instead of that which we have gained – the upsides that

we have stumbled upon along this journey.

Here are a few ways that myself and others have found solace over the past few months:

A Break from the Hustle

We can all agree that COVID-19 was absolutely unprecedented; like a surprising afternoon thunderstorm, it caught us all off guard. In what seems like a matter of days, everything ground to a halt. Daily routines were all of a sudden thrown askew as billions of people began working and learning from home. The streets near my house grew eerily quiet as people shuttered themselves indoors. The vibrant and fast-moving pace of life became a little slower.

I still remember standing in our kitchen when I got an email from the president of my university, explaining that we would be learning remotely



until “things got better.” Interestingly enough, my gut reaction to this news was that of relief. I was calmed to let go of my many responsibilities. For the first time in a while, I was able to breathe and relax. I was able to catch up on my sleep.

For many, the first weeks of quarantine served as a much-needed respite from the busyness of our lives. No longer did we have to worry about getting to work, dropping kids off at activities, or running to the store. The humdrum to which we had grown accustomed was suddenly inter-

rupted by COVID-19, and in turn, we were each given the opportunity to take a much-needed break.

Quality Time with Family

Simultaneously, this time-out from reality has allowed me to spend more time with my family. Admittedly, there were plenty of days when my family drove me crazy, but I have also relished in our time together. We have congregated for dinner almost every evening, we have watched mass together every weekend, and we have enjoyed several impromptu family movie nights. Such instances were few and far between before we were all quarantined together.

For my family in particular, this time together is bittersweet because my parents will officially become empty nesters once my younger brother begins college in the fall.

This has made our family moments even more special, as we all prepare for a significant amount of time apart from one another. I am increasingly thankful for this time together, and I have a deeper appreciation for how lucky I am to have a supportive and loving family.

New and Old Activities

The past few months, my family has also managed to find small projects to tackle. We built a stone wall in our yard and stacked wood for our fireplace; we cleaned the pantry and I reorganized my room with my mom.

To the same affect, we have spent many hours completing jigsaw puzzles together, working late into the night to sort pieces and assemble landscapes of colonial villages and the New York City skyline. Needless to say, my passion for puzzling has been revived. I also have had the time to exercise more regularly, going on runs around my neighborhood or doing at-home workout videos. Both have served as beneficial breaks in my day, and keep my body moving after sitting all day long.

I have also taken advantage of the extra time on my hands to learn something new. I have watched a couple of documentaries and started listening to podcasts. Such activities have continued to keep my mind active, and I am grateful for the time to educate myself about these matters.

As I reflect on these pockets of joy in my life, I encourage you to ponder positive experiences you have had the past few months, even if they seem hopelessly hidden. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Albus Dumbledore says, “Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.” In these difficult times, I hope each one of you continues to search for the light in your life.



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