

Caregiving and Isolation: Do You Feel Like the Lone Ranger?

Monday, November 1, 2010

By LFHaccess



AARP Survey Reveals Loneliness is on the Rise

A recent AARP Magazine survey reveals that more Americans feel lonely today than they even did a decade ago, and older Americans are particularly at risk. In fact, 44 million adults over the age of 45 suffer from chronic loneliness ([link](#)).

Why the increase? One factor may be that it's prime caregiving time.

Caregiving can make you feel like the Lone Ranger—without your Tonto.

You feel like you're the only one, and although the statistics state that there are 52 million caregivers in our country— ([source](#)) but you wonder where they are.

They're just like you—behind closed doors at home caring for a loved one, or driving to and from care homes, doctor appointments, and pharmacy pick-ups. They're the ones behind you in line at the grocery store, but the problem is, no one's talking. We stand zombified in line after line and rarely strike up a conversation. We care for our moms, dads, spouses, grandparents, and disabled family members—and yet we can't figure out how to open up and start a friendly exchange.

Loneliness can be more serious than you think—Dr. Cacioppo, director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago has found a correlation between loneliness and diabetes, sleep disorders, compromised immune systems and even Alzheimer's.

It makes sense. You're lonely so you eat. You gain weight and put yourself at risk for diabetes. You can't sleep in part because of depression, but when you're caregiving it's likely that you're up several times a night to check on or assist your loved one—and not enough sleep affects your immune system. The lack of stimulation—lively conversations, travels, furthering our education—causes our brains to shrink and can contribute to dementia.

What to do? The catch is, you feel lonely, get depressed, have more health problems, and don't feel like forcing yourself to get out and make the effort necessary to change things. Even if you did go to all this trouble you still have to care for your loved one, be available at all hours of the day and night, and juggle a million appointments as well as be home more than maybe you want to. None of that is going to change....or is it?

Practical Ways to Combat Caregiver Loneliness:

1. Reach out and get in touch. When you're caregiving you need your friends more than ever. And yet it's easier to just pull in, not call, and give up. Your life can seem so

monotonous and bleak that you hate to even talk about it—or you're afraid all you'll do is whine and complain and not be able to stop. Get past all that and force yourself to make those calls. If you're retired or had to quit work to care give, call your co-workers and pick up right where you left off. Meet for lunch and listen to harmless (not hurtful) office gossip, keep in touch with the latest news and genuinely listen and feel compassion for what others are going through. Reach back through time and contact old classmates, roommates, crushes, friendships that dwindled, and relatives you haven't talked to in years.

2. Join online communities. The world is changing and online friendships can be real friendships. Caregiving based forums such as those on [Caring.com](#) and the [Alzheimer's Association forums](#) offer real people in situations similar to you—with a wealth of advice, humor, compassion, and connection. Don't stop there—join a dog forum if you're a dog lover, a knitting forum, garden group, a vintage car group or genealogy chat room. Not everything you do—in your everyday life or online has to be about caregiving—so branch out!
3. Reach out and help someone. Once a month do something for someone who's got it worse than you. You might not be able to volunteer 8 hours at a time, but find a way to give. Read stories at the Boys & Girls Club near you, write letters and collect care packages for our soldiers, teach knitting to a young girl's group at your church, serve in a soup kitchen at your local shelter—just one meal once a month. It helps us put our life in perspective and it also serves to get us out of the house and with other people who love to give. You'll return home grateful for a decent mattress, a coffee pot, and those who love you.

Caregiving and loneliness can go hand in hand, but refuse to see this as your fate. I found friendships in the most ironic places during the years I cared for my mom. (I was even invited to several of my mother's doctor's offices Christmas parties—and my mother's care aides became dear friends). Most importantly, I began to consider my own self a friend. I journaled, took walks, made my bedroom a sanctuary, and began to treat myself with kindness and patience because if I didn't it was too easy I knew I was just shrivel up and fade away—not to mention how easy it is to play the poor-pitiful-me card.

Think of loneliness as a temporary state—and something you can do a little something about. It takes effort, something that can feel in short supply, but the good thing about reaching out—is that others reach back.

This entry was posted on Monday, November 1st, 2010 at 10:58 am and is filed under [Caregiver Loneliness](#), [Caregiving](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed.