

# Social isolation and dementia: practical tools for communities and people living with dementia

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**marep**

Murray Alzheimer Research  
and Education Program

**sitp**

**SUPPORTING INCLUSION** *through*  
**INTERGENERATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS**

**RIA** RESEARCH  
INSTITUTE  
*for* AGING

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*Enhancing Life*

# Welcome and agenda

- Introduction
- Social isolation in Canada
- Health implications of social isolation
- Resource #1: By Us For Us Guide: Isolation and Enhancing Social Connections
- Resource #2: The Community Conversation Guide



## Land acknowledgement



The Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging (RIA) acknowledges that we are on the traditional territory of the **Attawandaron, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee** peoples.

The RIA is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.



# About the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging

The Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging (RIA) is a charitable, non-profit organization.

**Vision** A world where research is driving innovation to enrich the journey of aging

**Mission** To enhance the quality of life and care of older adults through partnerships in research, education and practice

**Values** Excellence, Relevance, Collaboration, Transparency, Inclusion



# Supporting Inclusion through Intergenerational Partnerships (SIIP)

The SIIP project reduces social isolation, and builds meaningful relationships between older adults living with dementia, care partners and youth.



The project focuses on:

- Intergenerational community programs
- Dementia education for youth
- Awareness building
- Research and evaluation



Funding for SIIP is provided by the Government of Canada's New Horizons for Seniors



## Social isolation in Canada

- Social isolation is the lack of meaningful communication, contact or interaction and can be caused by a variety of factors.
- Nearly 30% of older adults in Canada are at risk of experiencing social isolation.
- 19-24% percent of Canadians over the age of 65 feel isolated and wish they could participate in more social activities<sup>1</sup>.
- Research shows that when we spend more time with loved ones and remain connected to the community, it's better for our overall health and cognition<sup>2</sup>.

# Social isolation: health implications



## Physical Health

- Increase in falls
- Cardiovascular disease
- Malnutrition
- Serious illnesses
- Functional decline
- Greater likelihood of disability

## Mental Health

- Increased risk of depression
- Increased risk of dementia
- Decreased overall life satisfaction
- Elder abuse

## Health Services

- Higher rate of emergency department visits
- Increase in physician visits
- Increase in long-term care admission
- More likely to be readmitted to the hospital following a procedure or surgery

## Risk factors for social isolation

- A recent or significant loss
- Sensory loss, such as hearing or vision
- Living in rural or isolated areas
- Health conditions that make someone vulnerable or frail
- A small social circle
- Being over the age of 65
- Mobility restrictions
- Language barrier or being a recent immigrant
- Living alone or far from family
- A low income
- Are a care partner for someone
- Identify as part of an equity-deserving group
- Mental health concerns, or cognitive or functional impairment
- Loss of their driver's license





## Risk factors for social isolation

- As a person gets older, the risk of social isolation increases significantly.
- Generally, the more risk factors present, the greater the likelihood of social isolation.
- Certain risk factors may impact individuals and groups of older adults differently.



# What is Dementia?

- A group of conditions that impact a person's memory, ability to solve problems, language, mood, and behaviour
- Dementia is progressive where symptoms start mild but get worse over time
- Many types of dementia, including:
  - Alzheimer's disease
  - Vascular dementia
  - Lewy-body dementia
  - Fronto-temporal dementia
  - Mixed dementias



# Dementia and Social isolation

## A reciprocal relationship

- Social isolation is a risk factor for dementia
- Dementia can change how a person connects with others and their community, meaning people living with dementia and their care partners are at a higher risk of social isolation.





## Dementia and Social isolation – Stigma

Stigma associated with dementia includes negative attitudes, preconceived ideas or discrimination against a person because they have dementia or are supporting a person living with dementia.

- Feelings of embarrassment, shame or fear can cause a person living with dementia and care partners to isolate themselves

## Dementia and Social isolation – Changing abilities



Changing abilities and other changes associated with dementia may make it more difficult to socialize and can increase risk of becoming socially isolated.

“Dementia causes an increase in tiredness, which has an effect on your ability to socialize. For example, there may be an event, and you have to go home early because you are tired. You may not get to go at all because it’s too far away and the dementia causes you to be unable to drive.”

*- John Hammel, Person living with dementia*



## Social isolation

### What can help older adults stay connected?

- Having satisfying relationships and a supportive social network
- Feeling connected to and valued by others
- Having communication and literacy skills to find and get needed services
- Having access to health and community services

**Social isolation doesn't have to be part of aging and there are many tips and strategies to support people living with dementia to stay connected.**

## Resource #1 - By Us For Us Guides

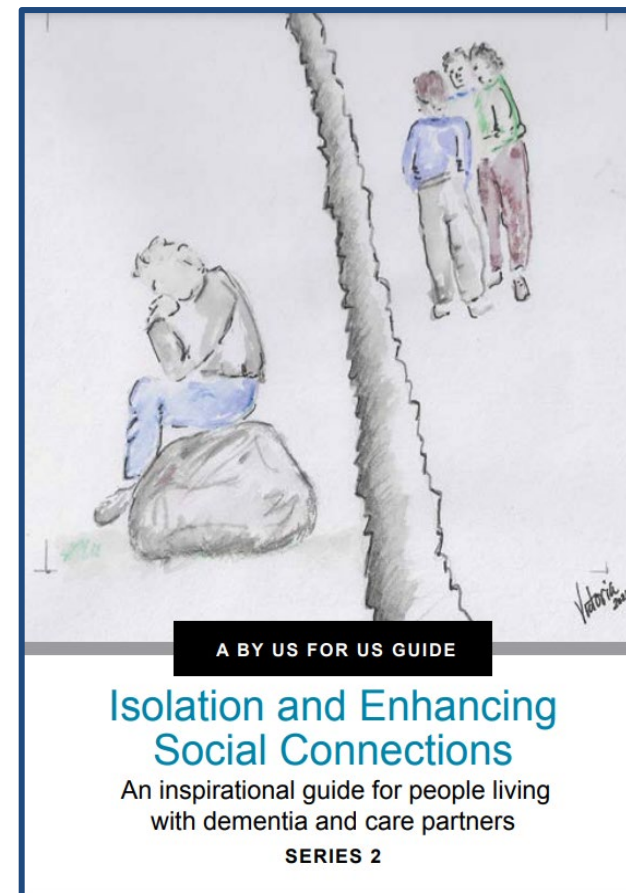
A series of 16 resources created by a talented and passionate group of people living with dementia and their care partners.

These guides are designed to provide people living with dementia and their care partners with the necessary tools to enhance their well-being and manage daily challenges.



# By Us For Us Guide - Isolation and Enhancing Social Connections

This guide outlines how people living with dementia and their care partners might experience social isolation and offers some strategies to help you reduce your risk for social isolation and enhance your social connections.





# What's inside the guide?

## Risk factors

- Marginalized communities
- Age and health
- Living situation
- Finances
- Stigma

## Living situation

- Living alone.
- Living in a group setting such as a long-term care home and not being able to leave your home to socialize and engage in activities during times of flu outbreaks.
- Living in a rural area with a small population and limited services.
- Needing to stay at home during a flu outbreak and not being able to participate in usual social activities with family and friends.
- Not having access to transportation.



# What's inside the guide?

## Changing abilities

- Being tired
- Sensory changes
- Communication challenges
- Changes in mobility
- Challenges with engaging in activities

## Coping tips and strategies

To reduce noise, echoes and distractions if you have trouble hearing or find it too loud at a social event or activity:

- ✓ Ask the person you are speaking with to talk slower.
- ✓ Sit with your back against the wall, in a corner, in a booth or at the end of a table.
- ✓ Search for restaurants in your area that do not play music, or ask for the music to be lowered.



## What's inside the guide?

### Changes in relationships with friends and family

- They may find it difficult to see you experience changes and may not know how to interact as well as they used to.
- They may no longer feel comfortable visiting or may stop inviting you to social activities, making you feel left out.
- It may be difficult for you to visit them if they live far away.



**“ . . . people kind of shy away from you a bit once you get the diagnosis of dementia, because they don't know how to react to you ... [as before].”**

**- *Person living with dementia***

# What's inside the guide?

## Staying Connected

- Have a social network of people you can trust
- Engage in activities
  - **Hobbies:** photography, painting, woodworking, pottery, puzzles, cards and games, crafts, reading, listening to music, gardening, traveling, volunteering.
  - **Recreation:** exercising, biking, walking, dancing, participating in or watching sports.
  - **Spending time with family, friends and pets:** having coffee or meals, shopping, joining a social group, talking on the phone, texting, email, video chat, or online forums.
  - **Religious and spiritual activities.**
  - **Day programs, community activities, support groups;** attending webinars and education about dementia or attending classes; participating in research studies and projects.



# What's inside the guide?

## Staying Connected

- Community services
- Personal development
  - **Alzheimer Society** (social workers, groups, education and events).
  - **Community services** (home care, volunteer friendly visiting, meals, shopping, housekeeping, exercise programs, day program and medication alerts).
  - **Government programs.**
  - **Legions and Rotary groups, etc.**
  - **Libraries.**
  - **Places of worship.**
  - **Community or seniors' centres.**
  - **Respite** (short term care for people living with dementia).
  - **Family and Resident Councils in long-term care.**





## Where to find the By Us For Us Guides

To view other guides or order print copies, please visit the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging website:

<https://the-ria.ca/resources/by-us-for-us-guides/>

We welcome your input!

If you are living with dementia or are a care partner and would like to comment on this guide, suggest topics for future guides, or participate in future guides, please contact Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program (MAREP).

# Resource #2: The Community Conversation Guide

## Why did we develop this guide?

- Build awareness of social isolation in older adults
- Help identify those at risk
- Provide support for engaging in conversations with older adults
- Direct to appropriate services or supports





# A community approach to addressing social isolation

## Why is a community approach is needed?


- Support required to identify social isolation exceeds what the health system can provide.
- Everyone in the community has a role to play in addressing social isolation.
  - Friends, family, neighbours.
  - Community organizations (e.g., adult recreation, senior centres, libraries, faith communities).
  - Emergency services.
  - Businesses (e.g., hairdressers, bank tellers, grocery store clerks).



## Development of the Community Conversation Guide

The conversation guide was developed using a co-design approach

- Reviewed literature / resources
- Interviewed key organizations
- Hosted community consultations
- Pilot tested and revised content
- Completed follow-up interviews
- Shared final version with community
- Developed national resource



**“I think that isolation is probably something that we've all observed, but maybe don't know what to do. And so, it sounds practical in terms of giving some strategies about how to actually do something.”**  
– *Community member*

# What makes this guide unique?

- Intended for community member – easy to read, relatively short
- Practical resource – includes real-world examples, conversation starters
- Combines awareness and action

## Signs to look out for

### How do you identify an older adult who may be experiencing social isolation?

Being aware of the signs of social isolation can help you identify changes or important considerations for someone's well-being. Consider these questions:

- Have they disclosed feeling lonely or secluded?
- How is their hygiene? Do they have clean clothes on?
- Are they getting dressed? Or are they staying in the same clothes/pajamas for long periods of time?
- Where are they getting their meals?
- Are they eating enough, or do they have a lack of appetite?
- Is their driveway shoveled in the winter? Is their lawn mowed in the summer?
- Is their garbage out on the side of the curb on garbage day?
- Has a loved one passed away recently?
- Do they have family or friends nearby?
- Has their behaviour changed, or have they recently stopped going to social events they used to enjoy?
- Have they stopped attending church or faith groups that they used to belong to?
- Are they particularly chatty?
- Are they sleeping more than usual?
- Have they shown a decrease in physical activity?
- Do they show signs of depression or anxiety?
- Have they stopped calling the people they used to? Do they feel they have nothing to talk about with you?
- Are they more forgetful, or are they having a hard time remembering new information, or forgetting how to do a common task?
- Are they less attentive? Have they become more complacent?
- Have they lost interest in most things?

*"I think the more guidance and the more people collaborating to help meet individuals to support, the better, especially right now..."*

- Community Member



# Brief overview of the Community Conversation Guide



## Identifying an older adult who may be experiencing social isolation

- Being aware of the risk factors and signs of social isolation can help you identify changes or important considerations for someone's well-being.
- The guide includes questions to consider, like:
  - Is their driveway shoveled in the winter?
  - Is their lawn mowed in the summer?
  - How is their hygiene?
  - Do they have clean clothes on?

**“I think the more guidance and the more people collaborating to help meet individuals to support, the better, especially right now...” -  
*Community Member***

# Brief overview of the Community Conversation Guide

## Barriers to participation

Sometimes older adults do not participate in their community because they face significant barriers, especially in rural settings.



- Transportation barriers
- Financial barriers
- Language barriers
- Barriers experienced by equity-deserving groups
- Social barriers
- Internet access
- Fear
- Physical health status

# Brief overview of the Community Conversation Guide

## Strategies for individuals to support socially isolated older adults



### Individuals can help by:

Asking the older adult what type of help or support they need.

Learn about service providers in the community that offer supports to older adults.

Checking in with a visit or phone call.

Do a grocery run or share a home-cooked meal.

Recommend a program or service.

Offer to drive to appointments or other errands.

Connect with an older adult's care partners or family and see how you may be able to support.

# Brief overview of the Community Conversation Guide

## Strategies for organizations to support socially isolated older adults



### Organizations can help by:

Offer training to staff on social isolation and what to do if they see an older adult who may need support.

Learn about other service providers in the community that offer supports to older adults to be able to make referrals or seek opportunities to collaborate.

Alter services to provide accommodations to those who need it.

Check in on older adults who are connected to your organization and have been absent recently.

# Brief overview of the Community Conversation Guide

## Other tips and strategies - create healthy boundaries:

- Be aware of your boundaries and set limits to make sure they are respected.
- Let the older adult know when you have availability and will call/visit. This will help them know when they can expect you.
- Be honest. If you can't help with something, it is ok to communicate that.
- If you can, offer to call a service that can offer support.



# Brief overview of the Community Conversation Guide

## Resource Section:

- One of the most important things you can do as a community member is to know what supports are available in the community.
- Think about cultural organizations, recreation centres, libraries, transportation services and health and social services.



**Community Resources**

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This section is intended to highlight the community supports and resources that may be available in your area. There is space to write down contacts for these local resources.

**Emergency services:**

For emergencies, call 9-1-1  
Canadian Mental Health Association, call 1-844-HERE-247 (1-844-437-3247) or 1-877-688-5501

Name:	Phone:	Notes:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
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**Cultural and religious organization:**

For example: churches, mosques

Name:	Phone:	Notes:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

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## Where to find the Community Conversation Guide

To download a copy of the guide or order print copies, please visit the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging website:

<https://the-ria.ca/resources/social-isolation-a-community-conversation-guide/>





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## Comments, questions & answers

We'd be happy to answer any questions you have.

## Contact Information

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