**Loneliness**

Early in the Silver Sneakers days, when the program was first getting started and when we first started allowing it for memberships at our facility, we were told that any member, for any reason (they didn’t have to be exercising) could use their SS membership. They were very supportive of their members swiping their cards, even if they were going into a facility to play cards, socialize or have lunch. It wasn’t exclusively about exercising, it was also about socializing, which can be as equally important for some older adults. SS told us that getting out and socializing and all that that requires is also an important part of ones’ health and they wanted to capture that to keep their seniors socially and mentally healthy.

I received an article entitled, ‘How loneliness affects our health,’ Brody, Jane E., NYTimes, Dec. 11, 2017 from one of my article angels and held onto it to use here in my Friday column. I see loneliness often in our small town and I know, from experience how it can affect one’s health.

For decades, research has supported the potentially harmful effects of loneliness and social isolation on health and longevity, ‘especially among older adults.’ Brody had reported in her previous 2013 article, ‘that loneliness can impair health by raising levels of stress hormones and inflammation, which in turn can increase the risk of heart disease, arthritis, Type 2 diabetes, dementia and even suicide attempts.’

Older adults who reported that they felt left out, isolated or lacked companionship began to have difficulty with things like performing daily activities like bathing, grooming and preparing meals which led to a decline in health and increased death rates.

Dr. Dhruv Khullar, a physician and researcher at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York, cited evidence for disrupted sleep, abnormal immune responses and accelerated cognitive decline among the socially isolated and he called it ‘a growing epidemic.’

The article made a point that I’d never considered. The difference between loneliness and social isolation, because they don’t necessarily go hand in hand.

As defined in the journal Heart, by Julianne Holt-Lunstad and Timothy B. Smith, both psychologist-researchers at Brigham Young University; ‘Social isolation denotes few social connections or interactions, whereas loneliness involves the subjective perception of isolation with the discrepancy between one’s desired and actual level of social connection.’

Many people are ‘socially isolated’ and completely happy with their lives and not lonely at all. While other people can be lonely in a room full of people ‘especially if the relationships are not emotionally rewarding’ according to Dr. Carla Perissinotto and colleagues at University of California, San Francisco in 2012, where they found, ‘that most lonely individuals are married, live with other and are not clinically depressed.’

Loneliness can happen right at home. Holt-Lunstad also found, ‘that not all marriages are happy ones. We have to consider the quality of relationships, not simply their existence or quantity.’

Her research also found that surprisingly loneliness isn’t only something that happens to older adults. They analyzed 70 studies (3.4 million people) and found that the prevalence of loneliness peaks in adolescents and young adult, and then again in the oldest ages.

“We found stronger risks for those under 65 than for those over 65,’ Holt-Lunstad said, “Older adults should not be the sole focus of the effects of loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness needs to be addressed for all ages.”

Donovan and colleagues’ research found that loneliness might be a preclinical sign for Alzheimer’s disease.

Other research has shown that loneliness is also linked to a decrease of cognitive function as well as depression. In fact, ‘depression can have a greater effect than loneliness on the risk of cognitive decline.’

It’s often hard to know those who are lonely in our community. It’s even harder to know how to help someone who is lonely and depressed because of it. From my experience, we can’t make someone become more social and therefore happier, however we can check in on them and stay connected as much as possible. We just never know what a phone call or an invitation to go shopping might do to help combat a little loneliness! Just my thoughts this week!!