

You don't go through loneliness alone

By Ellen Waldman

March 30, 2022

Loneliness has been a much-discussed side-effect of the pandemic, and older adults are not an exception to being affected. The psychologist John Cacioppo, in his 2009 book "Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection," reports that loneliness may have twice the impact on early death as obesity and is as damaging as disadvantaged socioeconomic status.

A word used quite a bit to describe this is "languishing". But the opposite of languishing is flourishing. And some people were able to do just that. What did they do, and why did it work, according to the experts and local residents I spoke with?

Executive coach Brad Stulberg suggested recently in The New York Times to practice behavioral activation; the theory that your actions can influence your mood. "You don't need to feel good to get going, you need to get going to give yourself a chance to feel good."

A clinical psychologist wrote that for a lot of people, the key isn't making themselves do things that they think they should be doing, but being in contact with and getting comfort from others.

For a few local residents, living in a retirement community of peers was instrumental in staying connected with and feeling comforted by others. This is an important reason to consider moving from solitary living in your own home to a larger community, where being around others is built into the plan. We have several wonderful retirement communities here that I've mentioned over the years. This is a great time to take a tour, have lunch, and speak to the current residents to see how it might fit for you.

Even though living in a community, people still needed to find ways to keep engaged. Here's what one local resident found worked well. She took the delivered brown bag meal out of its boxes, placed them onto a lovely plate, put a candle on the table, added a small glass of wine, and got "dolled up when necessary".

She also dressed every day as if she had an appointment with a museum director. It helped keep her active, physically and mentally, since she dressed with a purpose and thus could not just "loll around in her bathrobe". She also crocheted lap robes for friends.

Research shows that the most successful interventions for loneliness appear to be the ones that combine volunteering with community. The wish to help another is innate to our nature, and there are dozens of ways to do this safely, even from home. Check out RSVP, formerly called the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, 541-857-7780. This is a great option, and comes with some additional benefits like supplemental insurance or small stipends. If you Google "volunteer options in Medford" you're sure to find one that fits your interests and skills. Caring helps us strengthen the bonds we have with others, and can bring a sense of flourishing to your life, too.

If you have tried some of these ideas and still feel you're less than flourishing, this is not a reflection of your failure. It does however point towards finding a different sort of support from people who care.

Here are two excellent places to start. The Program to Encourage Active and Rewarding Lives (PEARLS), designed for older adults experiencing depression is one. Also try the Options for People to Address Loneliness (OPAL) program, for people experiencing loneliness. Start by contacting Maria Wahl, 541-423-1372, at Rogue Valley Council of Governments for referrals to either program.

Accepting help doesn't have to mean giving up control. It just means you're not in this alone.