

Spotlight

Loneliness: Findings from IBM's Institute for Business Value 2017 Study on Loneliness in the Aging Population

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Loneliness is an increasing risk factor for a growing global aging population. Its growth is such that even the popular press has recently taken up the topic and its impact on society. With implications that extend to personal, economic, and even societal well-being, business leaders, medical professionals, policy-makers, advocacy groups, and social service organizations should not only be aware, but also active, in understanding, identifying, and addressing the root causes of loneliness in order to avert consequences.

IBM's Institute for Business Value recently conducted a study of the topic that explored how industries and organizations can strengthen the social fabric of older adults and help them maintain connections to their family, friends, and communities. Designed to better understand the scale of the problem, the study included 50 interviews with experts from six countries across a variety of disciplines. From these global professionals in health, social work, research, technology, consumer and device manufacturing, advocacy, and government emerged a fulsome view of issues and a set of recommendations for addressing those issues, published in May 2017 in the final report, *Loneliness and the aging population, How businesses and governments can address a looming crisis*.

Organizational understanding of loneliness and aging is imperative as larger numbers of citizens turn 65 each day and the average lifespan continues to increase. For many of the elderly, loneliness is a byproduct of declining social connectedness. But with social isolation comes a precursor to a host of poor medical and social outcomes that have economic ripple effects across families, multiple industries, and society as a whole.

At an individual level, loneliness is responsible for increased risks of heart disease, stroke, dementia, and death. Yet it remains difficult for the medical and social community to take action because of challenges in detection and remediation.

Beyond the aging individual themselves, health impacts extend to families and caregivers engaged in caring for older adults, with some 22% of caregivers reporting a health decline. The costs to those family caregivers are substantial and growing: AARP estimated that in 2013, the value of unpaid family caregiving in the United States was USD 470 billion, up USD 20 billion from 2009.

Loneliness almost invariably begins through some form of loss. It might be the death of a spouse, siblings, or other contemporaries, or migration of younger family members in pursuit of work or education. It may be the onset of physical deficits in mobility, hearing, or vision, which can have a striking impact on ability to interact even when there are others around. Lack of transportation is also a factor, as is a waning sense of purpose, relevance, or value, often at the time of retirement.

Addressing loneliness can be divided into two categories of challenges. At an individual level, identification efforts are hindered by the lack of standards for screening psychosocial health, co-morbidity with other health and social issues, and social stigma. But even if identified, significant disconnects deter efforts at design and development of comprehensive solutions. Among those identified in the report are: a fragmented and incomplete stakeholder ecosystem, disconnection among operations of multiple-point solutions and interventions, and the myth that older adults will not use technology.

Examples of various ways in which loneliness is being addressed today are referenced in the report, as are three common intervention levels used today for loneliness among older adults:

Individual—geared toward personal experience and interaction;

Community—ways of bringing groups of people and services together; and

National—large-scale infrastructure-based capabilities for connecting an older adult with people or services.

The demographic phenomenon that has increased life expectancies so dramatically over just a century makes loneliness a rather new societal issue. In order to overcome the needs of a changing society it is necessary to engage in innovative thinking, disruptive organizational and business transformation, and employment of new technologies not simply for managing, but for detecting the presence of loneliness at an individual as well as a collective level.

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Solving for loneliness will take a new kind of village, replacing losses with new connections. Intergenerational living or co-housing looks promising in proof of concepts around the world. New workplace options that allow one to retain a sense of identity, purpose, and value are emerging for those of post-retirement age and include everything from using existing skills in the gig economy to rising numbers of older entrepreneurs. And independence is being rediscovered through new transportation options, including ride-sharing and autonomous vehicles.

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Efforts to study the most resilient older adults by such organizations such as the University of California San Diego's Center for Healthy Aging, the University of Tokyo, AARP, and others could provide a basis for innovative strategies and interventions to help more of us age with vibrant social connections.

The report concludes with specific recommendations for service providers, businesses, employers, educators, governments, healthcare, social services, and advocacy groups.

Reference

IBM. (2017, May). *Loneliness and the aging population, How businesses and governments can address a looming crisis*. Retrieved from ibm.biz/loneliness