

The Importance of Connection - Social Isolation in Nova Scotia

Lyn Stuart

Recent guidelines from the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) shed light on the critical issue of social isolation. A concern that is particularly pressing in Nova Scotia. This newsletter aims to provide you with essential insights and local statistics to help you support yourself and your people effectively.

- **Social isolation** can be understood as a **measurable lack** in the number of relationships a person has.
- **Loneliness** is **more subjective** and can be understood as the feeling we get when our social relationships are lacking in terms of quality or quantity compared with what we expect them to be.

In Nova Scotia, approximately 20% of the population is aged 65 and over, a figure that is expected to grow in the coming years. With this demographic shift, instances of social isolation are on the rise, exacerbated by rural living conditions and the ongoing impact of the pandemic. Nearly 30% of Nova Scotian seniors experience some form of social isolation, creating increased health risks and mental health challenges. The increased risk of death is similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Social needs are different for everyone, and the feelings of isolation present differently as well. The first step to addressing social isolation is understanding your own social needs and feelings. Some things that can contribute to isolation are retirement, the death of family or friends, changes in living arrangements, poverty, lack of transportation, gender and sexual identity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.



Caregivers have been noted by the CMHA as being at higher risk of social isolation.

Some key highlights of the new policy and some practical tips -

1. **Community Engagement:** The CMHA emphasizes keeping engaged with your community. In Nova Scotia, where community ties are strong, leveraging local networks and resources can significantly reduce feelings of isolation. Is there a senior center or library in your local area? A volunteer opportunity or a support group?
2. **Technology Access:** Ensuring that seniors in Nova Scotia have access to technology is crucial for maintaining connections. Initiatives to enhance digital literacy are gaining popularity and can be found at local libraries. Ask your librarian about lending devices like iPads and free access to technology!
3. **Physical Well-being:** Regular physical activity is encouraged. Our beautiful province hosts many beautiful scenic trails to walk on. Many community centers lead exercise programs and Walk Nova Scotia hosts free events throughout the year.
4. **Mental Health Support:** Accessible mental health support is vital. There are many free virtual programs online through NS Health on things like mindfulness and self-care. Some clinics offer free sessions with therapy students at different times throughout the year as well, or you can self-refer through our public health system. Support groups can offer a place of connection, can address feelings of isolation, and can assist you with building a support network.
5. **Monitoring Your Well-being** can be key to keeping yourself well. Remember, make an appointment to check in with yourself - caregivers need care, too!
6. **Animal-assisted therapies** have been shown to be effective against social isolation. Animal ownership, or volunteering to care for a dog with organizations like the Elder Dog Network or your local SPCA can provide some therapeutic connection.

In conclusion, as Nova Scotian caregivers we are at higher risk of isolation. By staying informed, leveraging local resources, and fostering strong community connections we can ensure that the people we are caring for and ourselves lead more fulfilled and connected lives.