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### **Loneliness and Aging: What We Can Do**

Even five years after the initial outbreak of COVID-19, older adults still report feeling lonelier than before the pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that about 1 in 3 adults in the U.S. feel lonely, and about 1 in 4 reports not having social and emotional support. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory naming loneliness as one of the most pressing public health concerns in the U.S. The report states that loneliness is associated with a greater risk of premature death, cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, and anxiety.

Utah State University Extension defines loneliness as the difference between one's preferred and one's actual social connections. There may be several reasons why people feel lonely as they age. As we get older, we experience loss of important relationships, life changes, mental health issues, chronic disease, living in rural areas, and limited transportation, which contribute to social isolation.

If you or someone you know is experiencing loneliness, it could be helpful to identify why you are feeling lonely. Is there a perception of the absence of a close personal confidant (spouse/significant other), a longing for a quality friendship or closer family connections, or are you looking for community ties with a social group? When you have identified what makes you feel lonely, you can identify strategies to help improve your situation. Below are some tips to help with isolation.

- **Join and Strengthen Social Groups:** Social groups can help people connect. They can be religious or civic. Being active and participating in group activities is a good way to get to know other people with similar interests.
- **Provide Service:** Research has found that people actively volunteering with their community report lower stress levels. People report feeling a sense of satisfaction and reward from acts of service to others, along with improved mental health and a sense of happiness.
- **Use social media purposefully:** Use this tool to learn about community events and stay in contact with friends and family who live away from you. Do not use social media to compare your situation to others or feel pressured to represent yourself inauthentically.
- **Reach out for support:** People sometimes do not know how to support you until you express your need to them. We all have felt lonely at times. If you do not have someone to reach out to, consider meeting with a therapist who can help you understand your thoughts and feelings.
- **Find and Strengthen Friendships:** Our friendships help to act as a buffer when we lose someone close to us. Consider reaching out to friends you haven't connected with for some time. You can also seek to establish new friendships by making time and engaging in more social activities. Making new friends takes time, so be patient with yourself. Try engaging in one-on-one or small group interactions instead of large groups.

Remember to practice gratitude and think positively. Gratitude is associated with well-being and is beneficial during difficult and stressful times. Consider things you are thankful for daily and express them to someone you appreciate. Focus on what you can control and feel confident that you can create and maintain the types of relationships that you want in your life.