



# 11

## Social Participation, Social Connectedness, and Leisure among Older Persons

### Chapter Overview

In this chapter, you will learn about the importance of social networks and social participation in later life and its association with well-being and quality of life. This chapter will also attempt to dispel stereotypes about older adults being lonely, socially isolated, and unproductive members of society. Many older adults are socially active and enjoy life to its fullest through volunteering, caregiving, and participating in social activities in their communities. They tend to enjoy the same types of things they did when they were younger; however, due to certain restraints (e.g., transportation or health) they may not be able to participate as often as they used to.

Being active is important in maintaining a social identity and independence. Having social networks is important because it represents an active engagement in life. People who are socially connected have a higher quality of life, are able to deal better with adversity (e.g., illness or loss), and also tend to live longer and healthier lives. It is important to provide older adults with options for social participation so that they are able to choose the type of involvement that suits their individual needs and interests, while allowing them to maintain their dignity and identity.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

- Describe several ways in which social networks influence social participation in later life.
- Explain how social participation in later life results in a higher quality of life.
- Understand why older adults are involved in volunteer work, education, tourism, gambling, crime, politics, religion, and the mass media, and the consequences of these behaviours.
- Differentiate between loneliness and social isolation; describe the contexts under which they occur; and identify vulnerable groups of older adults who are at risk of these social issues.
- Articulate the meanings, forms, and patterns of “leisure” in later life.

## Key Facts

- The social network of older Canadians primarily includes immediate family (45 per cent), friends and extended family (30 per cent), and neighbours (15 per cent).
- About 40 to 50 per cent of older adults are engaged in formal volunteer activities.
- More than 100,000 older Canadians are enrolled in some type of educational program, including a few who are pursuing a PhD degree.
- Among those aged 65 and older, up to 10 per cent are considered to be a problem gambler.
- Only about 4.5 per cent of all incarcerated persons are 65 years of age or over.

## Key Terms

**Loneliness** A subjective feeling that one lacks personal relationships (emotional or social) and/or meaningful communication with significant others. (p. 360)

**Social isolation** An objective self-perception that one’s social network is small or decreasing and that one lacks social relations with other people. (p. 360)

**Social network** A set of formal and informal relationships that include a core group (the family) and a more transitory extended group (friends, co-workers, neighbours). The number and availability of members in the network varies at different stages across the life course. (p. 356)

## Study Questions

*See below for answers.*

1. Is loneliness and social isolation in later life a myth or fact for older adults? Explain your answer.
2. What motivates older adults to volunteer? How does it benefit them?

## Additional Resources

### *Articles and Reports*

- Arriagada, P. 2018. [A day in the life: How do older Canadians spend their time?](#), *Insights on Canadian Society*, Statistics Canada.
- Krugel, L. 2017. [Aging inmates: Correctional Service of Canada has strategy in the works](#), The Canadian Press.
- Menec, V. Harasemiw, O, Newall, N, Shooshtari, S, and Mackenzie, C. 2017. [From Social Integration to Social Isolation: The Relationship Between Social Network Types and Perceived Availability of Social Support in a National Sample of Older Canadians](#), *Research on Aging*.
- National Seniors Council. 2017. [Who's at risk and what can be done about it? A review of the literature on the social isolation of different groups of seniors](#).
- Nimrod, G., & Shrira, A. 2014. [The Paradox of Leisure in Later Life](#). *The journals of gerontology. Series B, Psychological sciences and social sciences*, 71(1), 106-11.
- Statistics Canada. 2015. [Infographic: General Social Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating](#).

### *Videos*

- Employment and Social Development Canada. 2017. [Plan your future today: Live the life you want tomorrow](#)

A series of videos including, *What is planning for Aging in Place?*; *My Home and Neighbourhood*; *My Social Connections*; and *My Supports and Services*.

- Goldman, B. 2018. [Prescription for loneliness in seniors](#). White Coat, Black Arts, CBC Radio. (26:29 minutes)

White Coat Black Art looks at ways of dealing with loneliness in seniors. We visit roommates Cara Duncan, 23 and Lesly Adamson, 92. Dr. Mayur Lakhani, a family doctor and president of Britain's Royal College of General Practitioners, talks about the social prescribing expert in his office who guides his patients to local community activities. Dr. Helen Kingston, another UK doctor, tells Brian about the Compassionate Frome Project, a plan to treat lonely patients in her hometown of Frome.

- I Like Giving. 2014. [I like being 98](#).

This film tells the story of Evelyn who, despite her limited resources, goes out of her way to help her neighbour.

- Pinker, S. 2017. [The secret to living longer may be your social life](#). TEDTalk. (16:03 minutes)

The Italian island of Sardinia has more than six times as many centenarians as the mainland and ten times as many as North America. Why? According to psychologist Susan Pinker, it's not a sunny disposition or a low-fat, gluten-free diet that keeps the islanders healthy—it's their emphasis on close personal relationships and face-to-face interactions.

**Websites**

Campaign to End Loneliness, Connections in Later life (UK), [www.campaigntoendloneliness.org](http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org)

National Seniors Council, [www.seniorscouncil.gc.ca](http://www.seniorscouncil.gc.ca)

## Study Questions—Answers

1. Loneliness is sometimes assumed to be a common experience among older adults and is often reported as one of the main problems in later life. But is loneliness a universal and inevitable experience? The answer, like so many social processes associated with aging, is that it depends on a number of personal and structural determinants. Consequently, loneliness, like many other characteristics found among the older population, reflects heterogeneity and change over time. Some adults are lonely throughout the life course; others have never been lonely. Some become and remain lonely after experiencing certain life events (widowhood, institutionalized living) or as a result of being socially excluded from society through ageism; others recover from periods of loneliness. It is estimated that approximately one in four older Canadians felt lonely at least some of the time (asked for the preceding week of being interviewed) (pp. 360–362)
2. In general, people volunteer their time for the following reasons:
  - to meet people, expand their network, and avoid social isolation and loneliness
  - to be productive and contribute to society
  - to assist other generations
  - to share their knowledge, experience, wisdom, and skills
  - to advance a personal interest or cause
  - to fill time, keep active, improve health, and build a sense of purpose in daily life
  - to develop or maintain an identity, self-esteem, and well-being
  - to engage in an active and healthy lifestyle
  - to demonstrate independence
  - to acquire new skills
  - to gain entry to a full- or part-time job
  - to play a leadership role
  - to interact with younger people, especially those who have similar interests

Volunteering has been shown to increase subjective well-being, in part due to greater availability of social support from friends and family, relative to non-volunteers. Research also indicates that the benefits of volunteering are highest for the older-old, the less educated, and retired individuals, but more research is needed given the different types of Volunteering sectors (e.g., non-governmental organizations such as the Alzheimer's Society, church organizations, local community services for older adults, etc.). (pp. 363–365)