



EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGIES TO ALLEVIATE SOCIAL ISOLATION EXPERIENCED BY CANADIAN SENIORS

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EMAIL: info@appta.ca

TELEPHONE: 1-506-444-8300

AGE-WELL National Innovation Hub, APPTA Inc.
100 Sunset Drive
Fredericton, NB
Canada
E3A1A3

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What is social isolation and why is it a challenge for older adults?

Issue:

- Social Isolation has negative effects on individuals' overall health and well-being
- Canada is already behind in the adoption of innovations and technology-based solutions that can benefit older adults and caregivers

Social isolation does not lend itself readily to an agreed upon definition; however, accepted understandings of what social isolation is include “a low quality and quantity of contact with others”¹ and “the loss of place within one’s group(s)”². Social isolation is a serious health risk and affects approximately 20 per cent of older adults³. It has been found to be as strong a risk factor for mortality as smoking, obesity, or lack of physical activity⁴. Seniors may be at risk of social isolation due to life transitions; personality and psychological response; and, social, demographic, environmental and health related factors. Specific groups of seniors may be at a higher risk of social isolation, such as those with

physical and mental health issues; low income seniors; seniors who are caregivers; Aboriginal seniors; seniors who are newcomers to Canada or immigrant seniors; and, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered seniors⁵.

The International Federation on Ageing states “the number one emerging issue facing seniors in Canada is keeping older people socially engaged and active”⁶. There is a need for innovative solutions that improve quality of life as well as social and economic inclusion. This Evidence Summary is based on a scoping review, which asked the question: *Can technologies be used to alleviate social isolation in older adults?*

Methods:

A scoping review was conducted to identify what technologies have been tested and used to alleviate social isolation or loneliness in seniors. In July 2018, guided by key terms, we searched CINAHL, PsychINFO and Scopus databases for primary studies published between 2008 to present. Articles were assessed for eligibility by two reviewers (LG and JR).

What technologies have been shown to be effective in alleviating social isolation?

Through 28 eligible, primary studies, a variety of technologies have been used as an effective means of communication and social engagement for seniors. Questionnaires, surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus groups were used to determine the impact of innovative practices and programs. Through video, computer or tablet programs, telephone use, and assistive technologies, research has shown positive outcomes for reducing feelings of isolation and/or loneliness. These findings highlight that innovation is not only about creating new technologies; it is also about changing the way people use them. Overall, programs that utilized technologies increased social connectedness; created a sense of purpose; opened up new experiences; and, provided valuable companionship and resources for older adults to remain in their communities.

Moreover, some studies did address seniors' uptake and adherence to technology use and found positive outcomes when proper training was provided⁷. Telephone programs, specifically, were seen as a convenient way for older adults to socially engage as long as they were able to choose the support they received from the program⁸. There were minimal barriers to older adults using these services, as all participants had a phone⁹.

What are the barriers to adopting technology-based solutions?

The populations most vulnerable to becoming socially isolated face barriers to access, such as minimal internet access; poverty (i.e. unable to pay for internet, phone service, technologies); staffing shortages for programs to provide initial training to seniors for technology uptake; and, uptake by seniors who have current mental health disorders. These barriers provide a realistic consideration for supporting technology-based programs in the areas that need them the most. The next section provides brief options for supporting older adults to overcome social isolation.

Recommendations

We anticipate these findings will help inform more in-depth exploration of approaches to address social isolation with changes in government policy, as well as systematic coordination across sectors. We identified three options for facilitating the adoption of technology-based solutions that can benefit older adults and caregivers to reduce social isolation and loneliness. These options could be pursued separately or simultaneously, or components could be drawn from each option to develop a new option:

- 1) Expand infrastructure, remove financial barriers, and provide technology training to support seniors who are at higher risk for experiencing social isolation: There is a digital divide that results from social and cultural inequalities in access to

new health-related technologies, and it is important that infrastructure be expanded in rural areas of Canada so as to enable older adults in these communities to have access to cell reception and the internet. Additionally, subsidies should be more readily available to facilitate access to technologies. The Government of Canada's Connecting Canadians program is one such promising initiative. Lastly, education and training strategies in technology adoption must be fostered in order for seniors to develop the capacity to use technology effectively.

- 2) Collaborate with stakeholders to co-create technology, policy, and service solutions: If new technologies are going to reach seniors who will benefit from them, stakeholders (policymakers, communities, researchers and thought leaders) need to work together. The Government of Canada's New Horizons for Seniors Program supports community-based projects focusing on social participation that are led or inspired by seniors, with one example being the Friendly Caller program recently launched in Alberta. Other provinces may consider funding similar programs.
- 3) Build on existing opportunities: Incorporate technology solutions into policy, program and service planning by putting in place programs that are known to be effective in reaching socially isolated older adults. Along with the examples provided in this Evidence Summary, AGE-WELL can provide the latest research from Canada and beyond in order for each government to make evidence-informed decisions and establish funding mechanisms to evaluate promising initiatives.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁹ Newall, N.E., & Menec, V.H. (2015). Targeting socially isolated older adults: A process evaluation of the Senior Centre Without Walls Social and Educational Program. *Journal of Applied Gerontology* 34, no. 8: 958–76. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0733464813510063>