

HELPFUL HINTS FOR SENIORS

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Connect and Live Longer

Holidays contain their own stressors for almost everyone; but for isolated seniors who see the parties, music, gifts, movies, dinners, and family gatherings from the sidelines, the loneliness can be crushing. In addition to facing the present holidays alone, some seniors also live with the bitter sweetness of days gone by. Of course, loneliness is not only a seasonal issue. Now there is evidence that loneliness is not just hard on our hearts, it is also bad for our health. A study of 5,000 students at Ohio State University, and studies of the elderly in America, the Netherlands, and China corroborate that the physiological costs of chronic loneliness can be devastating. According to John T. Cacioppo, “the lonely have greater resistance to blood flow in their veins, which can lead to high blood pressure. Saliva tests reveal that lonely people produce more cortisol, a stress hormone, over sustained periods. That eventually results in impaired immunity, less restful sleep, and cognitive decline for older people.” In the 1990’s, a team of Swedish researchers interviewed nearly 1,300 patients about to undergo artery bypass surgery. Only one of the 38 statements they tested: “I feel lonely” proved to be associated with their outcomes: The patients who said they felt lonely were 2.5 times more likely to die within 30 days of their surgery; five years later, their mortality rate was still nearly twice as high.

Dr. Bryan Cargill says “there are multiple indicators that having a network of supportive friendships can help us fight illness and depression, speed recovery times, and increase longevity by reducing stress.” In a very real sense, feeling connected can actually slow the aging process.

I was speaking not long ago with a senior who has recently moved into an independent living community near Cleveland. The choice to downsize had been difficult, and she had been somewhat anxious about the changes in her lifestyle after living alone for eight years. As we spoke I noticed a distinct change in her posture, a renewed vitality in her voice and an undeniable sparkle in her eyes. “I never realized how lonely I was until I came here”, she said, “Now I don’t have to eat alone anymore. I have so much to do and so many friends here.” She, like a growing number of active seniors, is discovering that successful aging doesn’t always place a physical limitation or condition at the top of the list of reasons to make a bold move. Sometimes there are personal and emotional issues that are just as important. Loneliness is certainly right at the top.

Her comment reminded me of an old, black and white movie I saw as a child. It was a comedy about a hapless Japanese soldier during World War II who had been left on a tiny Pacific island by his commanding officer with orders to defend his post with his very life against an attack from the invading American Marines. The movie detailed the earnestness with which the soldier accepted his solitary post. He feverishly created fortifications, trenches, and look-out posts. At night, his hyper-vigilance awakened him to the slightest noise. He gathered and ate his food carelessly so as not to be distracted. And he spent hours upon hours staring through his binoculars, scanning the horizon for that first hint of approaching enemy ships. The days became weeks and then months and then years. The radio he had been given to sound the warning had long since lost its power. His gun was rusted, his uniform was ragged and his boots were worn through. His life had become a dull routine from which he never wavered in answer to duty’s call. Unfortunately, despite his faithful perseverance, he had been forgotten. In fact, although the war was long over and the peace had been made, the lonely soldier never received the

good news. He maintained his mission to the best of his ability, watching for powerful enemies to appear at any moment. It was easy to see his utter shock and disorientation the day that a colorful raft appeared over the horizon with two beautiful women and two American soldiers (maybe one was Bob Hope?) looking to enjoy a day of fun at the beach. High-jinx, fear, mayhem, and fun ensue on both sides of this unfortunate misunderstanding; of course, resulting in a happy ending for all.

Some seniors seem to believe that it is a necessary duty to “soldier on” in a situation with diminishing meaning and joy. In a word, they are shriveling from loneliness. Life can become very dull indeed, when loneliness, like a vast gray sea, reflects nothing but emptiness on the horizon. There is good news. It might not be as cataclysmic as V-J Day, but it can be just as much a celebration. Bette Davis is right and “old age ain’t no place for sissies!” But like never before, there are options available for seniors to volunteer, associate, participate, and congregate in ways that push against the statistics and bring back the connectedness, laughter, and sparkle to life. Senior Centers, Councils on Aging, Senior Living Communities (such as Arbor Ridge!), your town’s Committee on Aging (Rhinebeck has a fantastic one!), hospitals, colleges, libraries, and churches all offer hundreds of interesting ways to be involved. In the words of Mark Twain: “Grief can take care of itself, but to get the full value of a joy you must have somebody to divide it with.” Do not allow yourself to become isolated. Do not accept a definition of life that includes loneliness as an inevitable obligation. Despite the losses and changes that life inevitably brings, you can find the courage to keep dreaming. James Barrymore once noted that “a man is not old until regrets take the place of dreams.”

There is a celebration on the beach. The dress is “come as you are” and the time is now! The war is over and the party is waiting. So let’s dance!