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Social Isolation in Aging Adults

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Abstract

The agency I interned at for the last year and half was Visiting Nurses Association & Hospice (VNA). The problem that I was looking into was social isolation in our aging adult population. Social isolation is a growing problem as the baby boomers are retiring and becoming senior citizens. Contributing factors to this problem are loneliness, disabilities, and a decrease in sensory abilities. The consequences are mental health decline, a decline in their physical ability, and mortality. My capstone project was implementing a birthday celebration with a local skilled nursing facility to gather as many occupants together to get to engage instead of them isolating themselves. The data showed that if people were invited and encouraged to participate, there was a greater chance of them engaging with each other. The plan is to get them to at least one or two gatherings and, in the end, they no longer need to be encouraged to attend because this would be something that they look forward to every month. I would recommend this program to more of the skilled nursing facilities in the county to decrease social isolation.

Keywords: Aging Adults, Social Isolation, Loneliness, Mortality,

Agency & Communities Served

VNA and hospice has been serving Monterey County, San Benito County, Santa Cruz County, and Santa Clara County since 1951. No one is turned away from assistance because they are unable to pay. VNA is a nonprofit agency. They have a 501(c)3 for tax exemption. They receive numerous donations and charitable gifts throughout the year. There is no age limit. We have provided services to anywhere from 6 years old to 98 years old.

The mission and vision statement for VNA are as follows.

Mission statement

VNA is dedicated to providing the highest quality health care to residents of the Central Coast by meeting their individual needs in a caring, effective, honorable, and accessible manner. (About Central Coast VNA & Hospice, 2020).

The way the mission statement can be applied to the communities served is assistance is available for all those that need it, regardless of their ability to pay for services.

Vision statement

VNA transforms the care and culture to meet the changing needs of patients, families and caregivers. While achieving positive results every day through quality standards, empowerment, teamwork, and accountability. We are trustworthy, innovative and unique in our clinical programs and customer service. We create a collaborative and respectful working environment recruiting highly skilled professionals while retaining satisfied employees. ("About Central Coast VNA & Hospice", 2020).

VNA has program specific training and provides services in the following.

Cardiac Care, Chronic Heart Failure (CHF), Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Diabetic Care, IV Infusion Therapy, Orthopedic Rehab Program, Palliative Care Program, and Wound & Ostomy Care.

Community services provided by VNA are,

Community Wellness, Flu Clinics, Home health Care, Hospice Care, School Health, and Travel Immunizations.

Problem Description

Social Isolation in aging adults is a problem in society. This is a growing problem as the baby boomers are now retiring and are senior citizens. According to an article in the Association of healthcare journalist, Social isolation and loneliness are associated with increased mortality in older adults. (Seegert, 2020). This is a problem because many people plan to retire and daydream and make plans, we forget that people get sick and death may occur. People do not know how to deal with not having a reason to get out of bed in the morning. For many days and years, we move through life with reasons and purposes, but no one seems to understand the feeling of no longer having the need to do the same routine.

Contributing Factors

Loneliness

Loneliness is a contributing factor to social isolation, because if aging adults do not have a good support system this can lead to a failure to thrive. Human beings are social beings. According to the Journal of Aging life care “social networks are likely to thin as people age, leading in many cases to isolation and loneliness. We have our groups that we belong to too.” (“Health Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness – Aging Life Care Association™”, 2020, para 1).

According to the CDC “Loneliness was associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Also, Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and 57% increased risk of emergency department visits.” (“Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions”, 2020 para 2).

As the CDC article states in the research above, there is a correlation between loneliness and social isolation.

Disabilities

Disabilities can be a contributing factor to social isolation because disabilities can cause a person to be or feel left out. According to an article in Forbes “Disabled people are more likely to be alone at least partially because of ableism and social neglect.” (Pulrang, 2020 para 4). Ableism can also be a form of discrimination, ("Definition of ABLEISM", 2020). Additional research states in an article on Friedreich’s Ataxia.com that” People with a disability don’t want to be isolated or lonely, but not wanting to feel like a burden to others... comes along with this reality.” (Dwyer, 2020 para 2). An article in Disability-researchers writes it best by stating “involuntary isolation can make a person feel "less than human" and bring up negative feelings. The causes of social isolation among disabled people can appear subtle. Here are the three factors that drive isolation among the disabled which are Disabled lack of access, social exclusion, and social comparison and self- identity. (2020, para 1)

As research shows that disabilities can contribute to social isolation, it doesn’t necessarily mean it is intentional. Many times, it happens because the individual feels its best, because in the grand scheme of things no one wants to feel like or be a burden.

Sensory Issues

Sensory issues can also be a contributing factor for social isolation in aging adults. Hearing loss can be a contributing factor to social isolation. This is a sign that some may not notice unless trained too. As reported by the American Academy of Audiology “Untreated hearing loss has serious emotional and social consequences for older persons, according to a major new study by The National Council on the Aging (NCOA).” ("Untreated Hearing Loss Linked to Depression, Social Isolation in Seniors", 2020).

NPR.Org reports a study that "Hearing loss affects 1 of every 5 people and is strongly linked to loneliness: Every decibel drop in perception in people under 70 increases the odds of becoming severely lonely by 7%, one Dutch study showed."("NPR Choice page", 2020).

"Individuals in these age ranges — along with those who are poor, disabled, single parents, in poor mental health, ethnic minorities or different in some way that makes them feel separate — are already at higher risk for social isolation in general, says Catherine Palmer, president of the American Academy of Audiology." ("Hearing Loss, Loneliness and Depression", 2020)

The above research illustrates how sensory issues in aging adults can assist in social isolations.

Consequences

Mental Health

A consequence that can be linked with social isolation is a decline in mental health. The less active we keep our minds the worse it can be. According to a meta-analysis co-authored by Julianne Holt-Lunstad, PhD, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University, "lack of social connection heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol use disorder. She's also found that loneliness and social isolation are twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity '(Perspectives on Psychological Science, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2015).' ("The risks of social isolation", 2020)

The World Health Organization states that "Over twenty percent of adults aged 60 and over suffer from a mental or neurological disorder (excluding headache disorders)" ("Mental health of older adults", 2020). Therefore, with already having a percentage of aging adults dealing with mental health issues these issues can be exacerbated with social isolation.

The research shows how a decline in mental health can be a consequence of social isolation.

Physical Health

Another consequence that can be a cause of social isolation is decreased physical health. “Long-term, isolation even increases the risk of premature death. It’s being called a “social recession” to match any economic downturn also caused by the growing pandemic and it can have profound physical and psychological effects.” (Gabbatt, 2020). Especially during the pandemic of Covid-19, as individuals are instructed to shelter in place this can cause our aging adult population to be less active which can cause more harm than good in their physical well-being.

According to an article in the Journal of Aging life care “health status can contribute to loneliness and isolation, thereby creating a “cause and effect” dilemma when attempting to define the relationships between loneliness, social isolation, health, and mortality. (Aging life care, 2020 pp. 5). This article discusses the correlation between physical health and social isolation. A decrease in physical health will lead to an increase in social isolation.

Mortality

Mortality is a known consequence due to social isolation. In an article written by the Coalition to End Social Isolation, “Social isolation compared to obesity has a 29% increased risk of mortality” (“About Us — Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness”, 2020) Since human beings need social contact to thrive it is no wonder why aging adults have an increased mortality rate. As people age their households change and decrease. As written in Health Affairs, it states

that, “The effect on mortality is found among both older adults and the broader population and is consistent across gender.” ("Social Isolation And Health | Health Affairs Briefs", 2020) This shows that there is no discrimination with mortality no matter the cause.

Problem Model

This part should be just the chart below and should match what you wrote about above.

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Factor 1 Loneliness	Social Isolation in Aging Adults	Consequence 1 Mental Health
Factor 2 Disabilities		Consequence 2 Physical Health
Factor 3 Hearing Issues		Consequence 3 Mortality

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project

An idea for a capstone project is having birthday celebrations and milestone Birthday celebrations. The birthday celebrations will first start out in assisted living residential communities. At first, they will just be my mentor from VNA and myself. Then we will then work on getting an appointment with a local high school in Salinas to recruit senior students to help with the birthday celebrations. High school students need to accrue so many volunteer hours in order to graduate. Therefore, this will help the students reach the volunteer hours needed and will also help with our residential birthday celebrations and this will also bridge the age gap. By bridging the age gap this will assist in decreasing social isolation and slow the progression of

depression. Milestone birthdays would be implemented once facility birthdays were ongoing. Milestone birthdays would consist of those birthdays 70,80,90, and 100. With the help of the VNA volunteer and the social workers, we would deliver cake, balloons, and flowers to the individual residents.

Project Purpose

Birthday celebrations will help address mental illness in the aging adult. The birthday celebrations will help with getting people out of their room and help them socialize with other residents. Depression is a big reason for the mental illness consequence. When people are feeling alone it is easy to fall down the rabbit hole of depression.

Project Justification

Birthday parties will help decrease social isolation. According to an online source Find continuing care states “A trend in many assisted living homes is monthly group birthday parties. A group birthday party in assisted living honors several residents at once. It takes the pressure off of a single resident and allows a resident to opt-out if they wish. Group birthday parties make residents with few family members or friends feel valued on their special day. They can spend time with other residents and enjoy special birthday treats and gifts. Activities include an exclusive tea or coffee time, cake and sweets, and a cheerful rendition of “Happy Birthday.” (“Forever Young: Planning the Perfect Birthday Party for Someone in Assisted Living | FindContinuingCare”, 2020) Birthday parties will help decrease social isolation in the skilled nursing facility, because as we continue to show up every month and engage with residents, they will become comfortable with staff and other residents. This will assist residents to interact with each other. The hopes are that the more parties will mean less residents in the rooms alone. Birthdays are a way to encourage reflection of one's life. This can offer a holistic

sense of identity for a senior that is vital to one's dignity and well-being and can make aging adults feel loved.

Project Implementation

Project implementation began by having a standing date each month with a skilled nursing facility in Salinas. Cake, balloons, and flowers will be provided. Staff and VNA will sing Happy Birthday to those celebrating birthdays for the month. Cake will be passed around and we will engage residents in conversation. We will discuss if they like cake, or if they would prefer something else on their special day. We are working on how to also join the residents in the memory care unit. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Assessment Plan

The way effectiveness of the birthday celebrations will be measured is by keeping track of how many residents are attending each month. The goal is to have the numbers of participants increase each time. I will keep track of the participants attending each celebration in a notebook and by taking pictures, with the facilities approval.

Expected Outcomes

It is the hope that the project will be successful and grow. Having most of the residents present and participating in the first birthday celebration at the skilled nursing facility with the help of VNA. As the program grows, we may see a decrease in social isolation.

Findings/Results

The program continued and VNA would still participate in providing cake and balloons for the birthday celebration. Non facility staff were unable to be present due to Covid, But the facility staff would keep us aware if they had clients present in the dining hall or not. As cases of

Covid grew in the facility there were less clients attending but the staff would make it a point to gather small groups in different parts of the facility while keeping six feet apart standards in place.

I had originally started with a quarter sheet of cake and then it grew mid-summer early fall to half sheet of cake. The increased size of cake proved that there were more people gathering in some form. The Program did meet the expected outcome in getting people out of their rooms and helping them to socialize.

Project Results

With the skilled nursing facility that VNA was affiliated with prior to having the birthday celebrations, there were many residents that were not celebrating their birthdays due to isolation. Now, that we are hosting birthday celebrations at this skilled nursing facility, there are 10 residents that are celebrating their birthdays with other residents in the community. We originally began with a quarter sheet of cake and have now increased to a half sheet of cake. This has helped us show that the residents are enjoying themselves and not isolating themselves. The data was collected by the skilled nursing staff since due to Covid-19, I was unable to be present for the celebrations.

Conclusion & Recommendations

What I learned about my project is how many aging adults are alone in our community. People that are alone are looking for a way to have some type of human contact with another person. My research results proved that this project should be continued if not expanded to celebrating milestone birthdays of clients in their homes. Recommendations that have been discussed was increasing the celebration to clients in their homes as well. We have discussed

putting together small mason jars and fill them with little candies and a small card. This would be easier to transport with the nurses and they would already be prefilled in the office, that way staff could carry them with their supplies as they tend to their client's residents and/or facility.

Personal Reflection

What I learned from this project was how big of a problem it is, not just in our community but nationwide. According to an article in Work "Social Isolation is becoming known as a silent killer-as dangerous as smoking to a person" (Work, 2020). This became more obvious while doing research and once we implemented the first birthday celebration at the skilled nursing facility. The facility and the residents were happy to see VNA staff there with balloons and cake. They appreciated having conversations with new people.

A success of the birthday celebrations is that VNA will now implement milestone celebrations to clients and hand out mason jars with candies and card. People want to connect with clothes and this a simple way of showing someone that they are important, and they matter.

A challenge that was faced during my project was Covid-19. As this affected everyone in some way or another. This put a damper on being able to be present for the birthday celebrations at the skilled nursing facility. This made it difficult to gather data for myself.

My capstone projects help to decrease social isolation. It helps people socialize in a nursing facility instead of hiding alone in their room.

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Appendix A**Scope of Work**

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
1st birthday celebration at Madonna Gardens		Feb 28th, 2020 @ 2pm	Quinn (Mentor) Lisa (me)