

CONFRONTING THE SCOURGE OF SOCIAL ISOLATION



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10:30 – 11:45 AM

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Bar Harbor, ME



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Today's Workshop Objectives

- Gain an understanding of the risks and consequences of social isolation among older adults
- Identify potential local, state, and national strategies for minimizing the risk and consequences of older adult social isolation



Central Principles for Fighting Social Isolation

- Need to support a productive aging perspective including creating **universal access** to services and resources in your community
- How to live an engaged and satisfying life into old age is **personally determined** by the individual
- **Everyone has something special** to contribute to the neighborhoods and communities in which they live
- We all have a responsibility to **fight the nihilistic mentality** that persists in society and fuels disengagement



A Compelling and Critical Social Issue

- Reducing isolation and loneliness designated one of 12 grand challenges for the profession of social work by the AASWSW
- The World Health Organization has affirmed it is a major health risk factor
- Designated one of AARP's top five new initiatives
- The NIH has recognized personal ties as a key focal point for research investment

The Isolation Risk is Greatest in Rural Communities

Older adults make up a larger proportion of the population in rural areas (20%) than those in urban areas (15%)

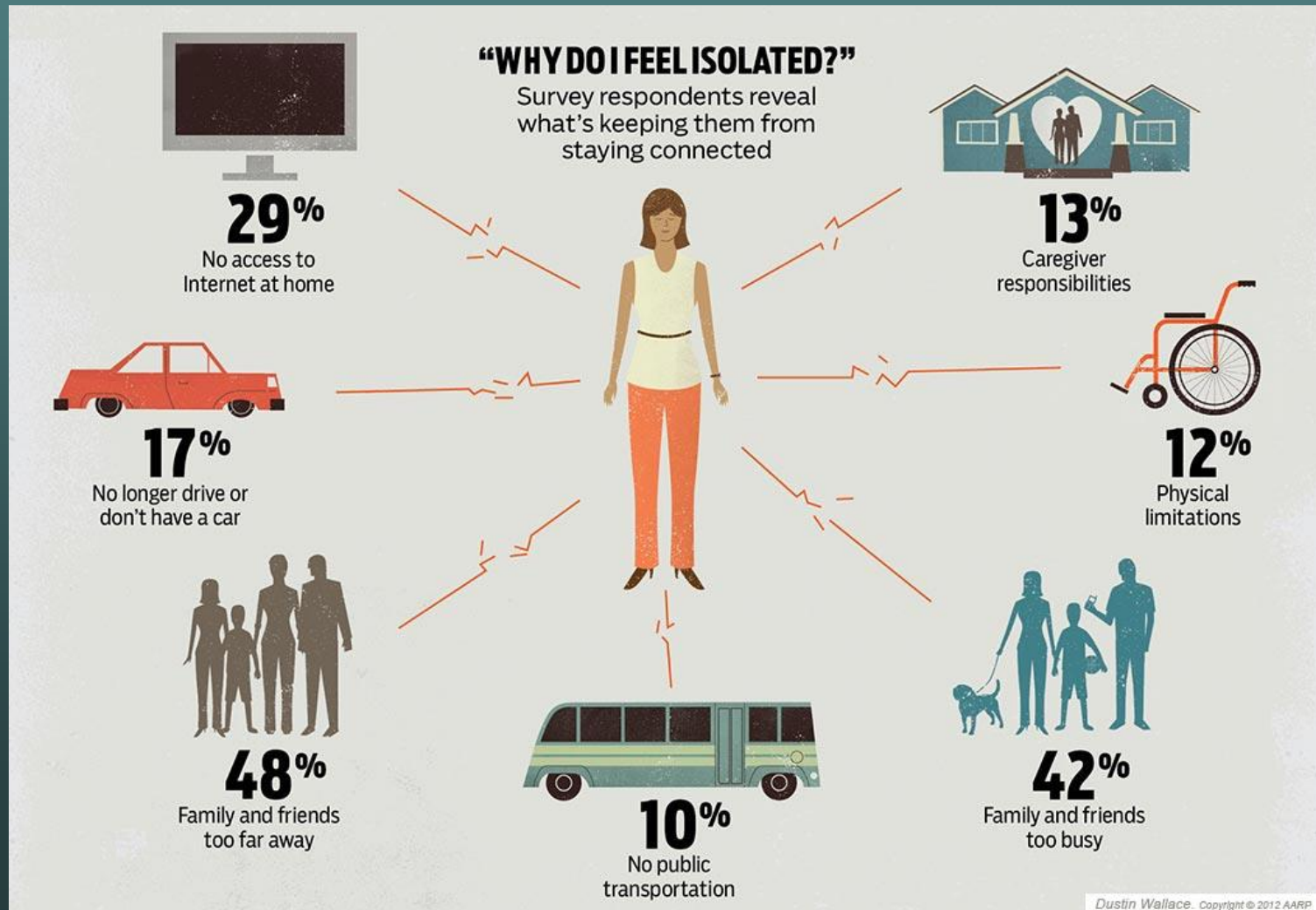


Classic Conditions That Put Elders at Risk of Poor Quality of Life

- Isolation
- Dependency
- Vulnerability
- Declining Physical
and/or Mental Health
- Acquiescence
- Loss



Why Do I Feel Isolated?



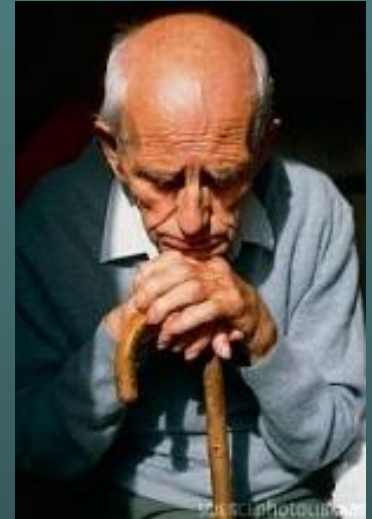
Social Isolation

- Americans more socially isolated than ever before
- Prevalence may be as high as 43% among community dwelling older adults
- Higher risk for caregivers of older adults as well
- Presents special challenges for older adults living in small towns and rural communities

At Greatest Risk

Older adults:

- With physical and functional impairment
- Living alone
- 80 years and older
- Living on low income
- Lacking instrumental support (access to transportation, the internet, telephone, etc.)
- With poor mental health
- With a weak social network
- Facing critical life transitions



The Consequences of Social Isolation

- Linked to loneliness and poor outcomes
- Negatively impacts health, well-being, and quality of life including increased risk of:
 - Disabilities
 - Lower self-reported health/well-being
 - Mortality and morbidity
 - Dementias
 - Hospitalizations
 - Falls
 - Common cold
 - Not surviving natural disasters
 - Poor health practices
 - Psychological distress
 - Neglect/exploitation

The Importance of Social Networks

- Provision of social support
- Social influence
- Social engagement and attachment
- Stress buffering
- Access to resources
- Stimulate the immune system

The Rural Factor is Significant

- Help seeking behavior is impacted by rural-urban status
 - o Rural elders adhere more to agrarian values that emphasize stoicism
 - o Rural elders use family and friends as first line of defense
 - o Rural elders prefer local, community-based services to formal, institutional care

Barriers to Engagement By Rural Older Adults

- Need for control and self-reliance
- Minimizing problem and resignation
- Concrete barriers
- Distrust of professional caregivers
- The value placed on privacy
- Emotional control



Question #1

What creative approaches to combatting social isolation can you imagine?



Keep a Eye on Older Men

- Men are 25% less likely than women to have visited a doctor within the past year
- Men are 38% more likely than women to have neglected having regular cholesterol tests
- Men are less likely than women to be screened regularly for high blood pressure, cholesterol, and cancers BUT 1.5 times more likely than women to die from heart disease, cancer, and chronic lower respiratory disease



Challenges to Serving Older Men

- Stiff upper lip mentality
 - May be a changing dynamic given the characteristics of the baby boomer generation
- Fear of losing independence, power, and control
 - Threats to masculinity
 - Danger of loss of autonomy
- Educating/reaching men who are isolated or not familiar to the human services sector
 - They won't come to us, we must go to them!



Your Greatest Allies – Family and Friends

- Reaching older Mainers through their informal natural helping networks
 - o Are more likely to obtain health care information from trusted friends/relatives
 - o Have trusting and enduring relationships with friends and relatives
 - o Informal supports can serve as health care mediators
 - o Important to accommodate family members who accompany elders to appointments



Question #2

Given the importance of informal supports in the lives of older adults, what can we do to ensure that family, friends, and neighbors are doing all they can in keeping older people from living isolated lives?



A Productive Aging Philosophy for Minimizing Social Isolation

The Traditional Perspective

- Nihilistic
- Deterioration
- Disability
- Institutionalization and dependence
- Rigid resistance to change
- Unable to learn
- Preparing for demise
- Vulnerability/Passivity
- Quality of life (One-dimensional)
- Societal disengagement

A Productive Aging Perspective

- Hopeful
- Growth and development
- Health and wellness
- Aging—in-place, independence, and interdependence
- Adjusting to change
- Intellectual stimulation
- Enjoying daily life
- Empowerment
- Quality of life (multidimensional)
- Societal engagement

A Productive Aging Paradigm for Geriatrics Practice (cont.)

The Traditional Perspective

- Community isolation
- Denial and avoiding challenges
- Needs, deficits, opportunities lost
- The past and what might have been
- The micro-environment
- Age appropriate behaviors
- Therapeutic stock-taking
- Sedentary lifestyles
- Receiving

A Productive Aging Perspective

- Community integration
- Confronting challenges
- Strengths, abilities, desires, opportunities
- The future and what can still be
- The macro-environment
- Age neutral behaviors
- Therapeutic enhancement
- Activity and activism
- Giving, volunteering, exchange

A Productive Aging Perspective ...

- Defends against the pitfalls of an ageist perspective
- Guards against encouraging “learned helplessness”, “excess dependence”, and “compassionate ageism”



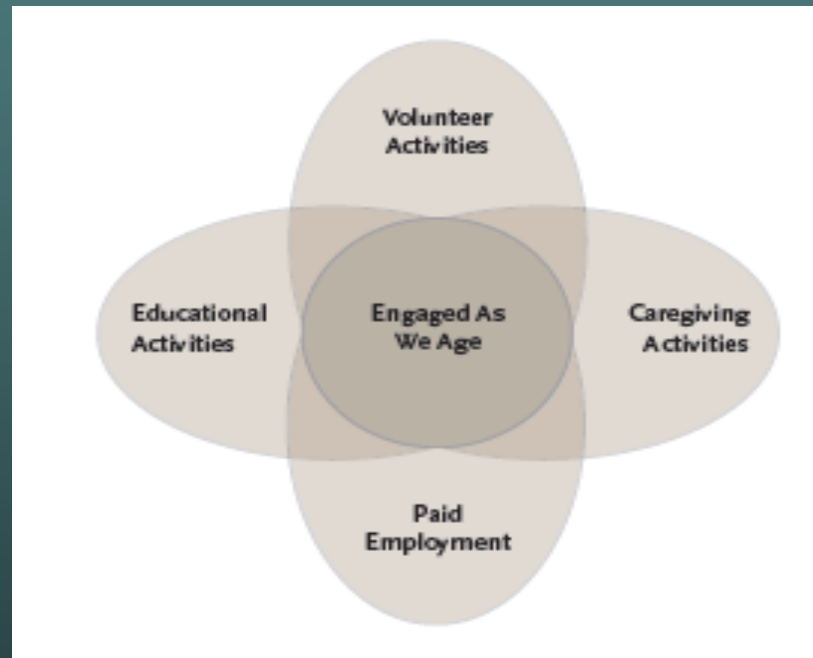
All Older Adults Have Certain Universal Human Needs

- A source of compensation
- A source of identity
- A source of structure
- A source of role and function
- A regulator of life
- A source of meaning
- **A source for social relationships**



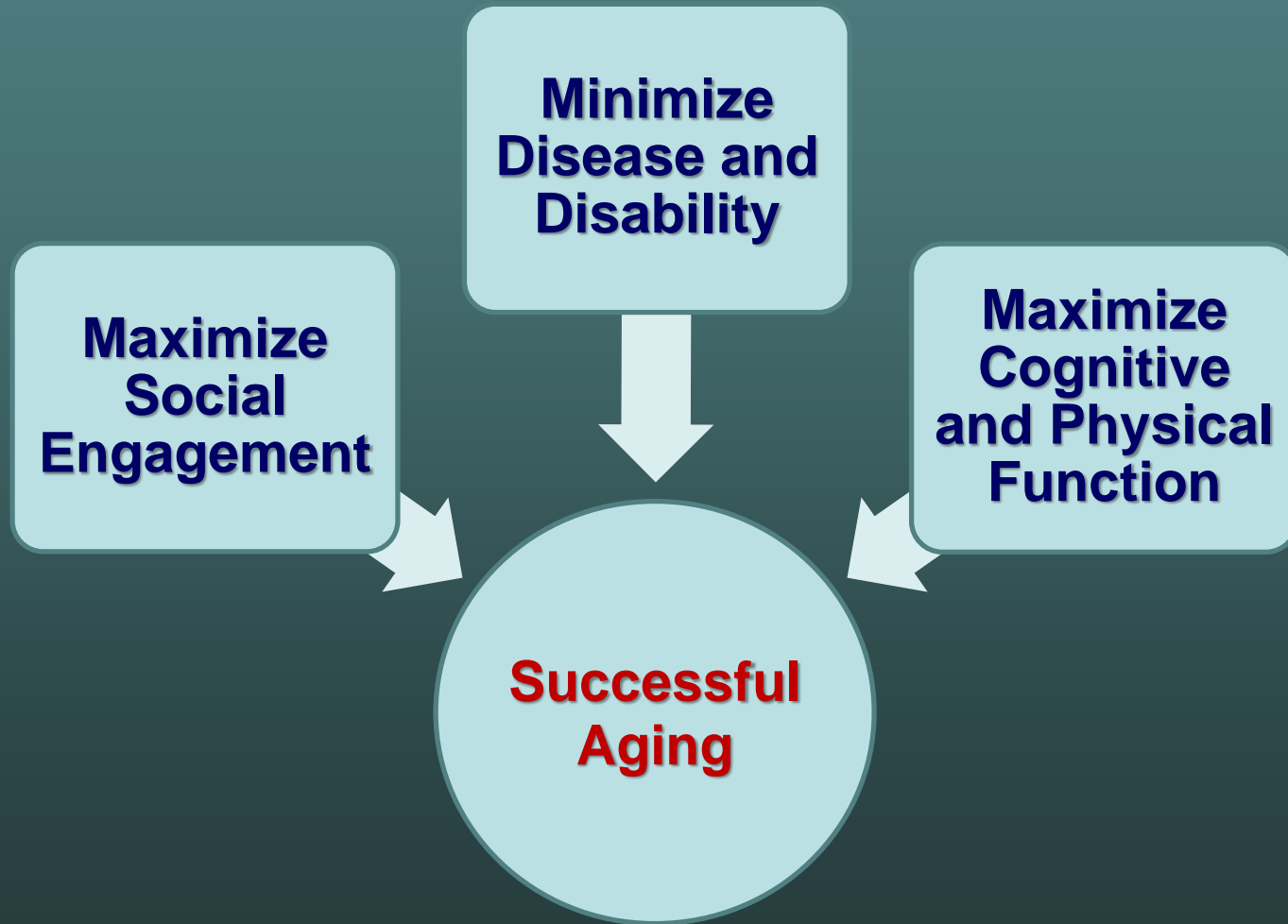
Productive Aging Means Remaining Engaged as You Age

Engaged Aging



Source: James, J.B., Besen, E., Matz-Costa, C., Pitt-Catsoupes, M., Engaged as We Age: The End of Retirement as We Know It, Sloan Center on Aging and Work at Boston College, Issue Brief 24, February 2010.

A Formula for Successful Aging



Thank you!

**Questions
and Final
Thoughts**





Contact Information



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