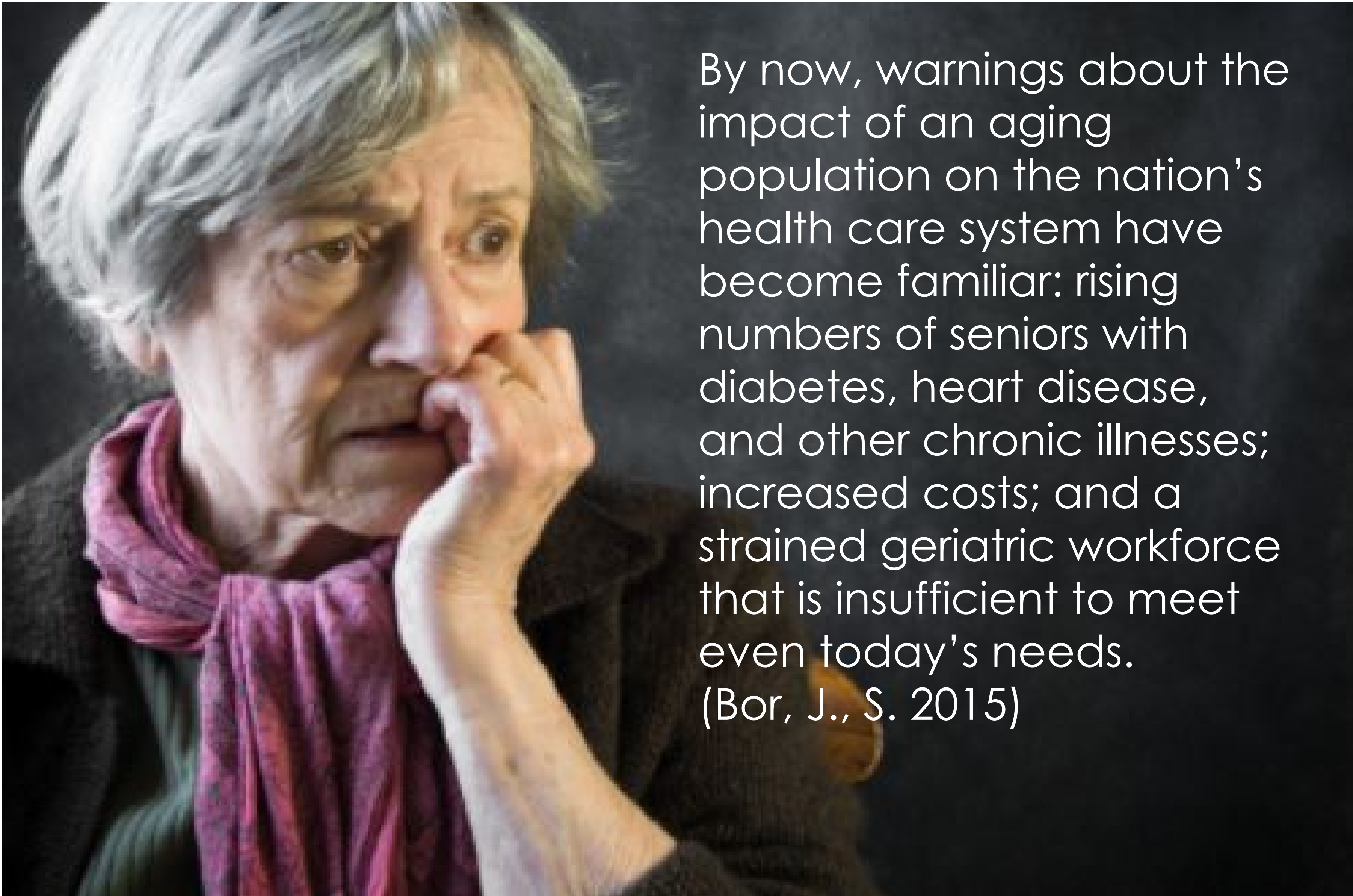




Older Adults & Isolation During COVID-19

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By now, warnings about the impact of an aging population on the nation's health care system have become familiar: rising numbers of seniors with diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic illnesses; increased costs; and a strained geriatric workforce that is insufficient to meet even today's needs.
(Bor, J., S. 2015)

What we often don't talk about enough is the dramatically rising number of older adults with serious mental health challenges

The New Challenge to Mental Health, COVID-19

And now we are faced with a new barrier to mental health for older adults, COVID-19, the Coronavirus. Older adults face increasing loneliness due to the necessary steps being taken to slow the spread of the virus.

Lockdowns, curfews and social isolation are being imposed in communities across the country, and from the point of view of reducing the rate of infection this is good, but, as we know, loneliness is a major barrier to good health for everyone and it presents some unique and severe implications for older adults.

COVID-19, Isolation, and Older Adults

Self-isolation disproportionately affects older adults whose only social contacts are outside of their homes.

Those who don't have close family or friends living within their personal "safe-zones" and who rely on outside contact through social programs and community activities can be placed at increased risk of mental health problems. (Armitage & Nellums, 2020)

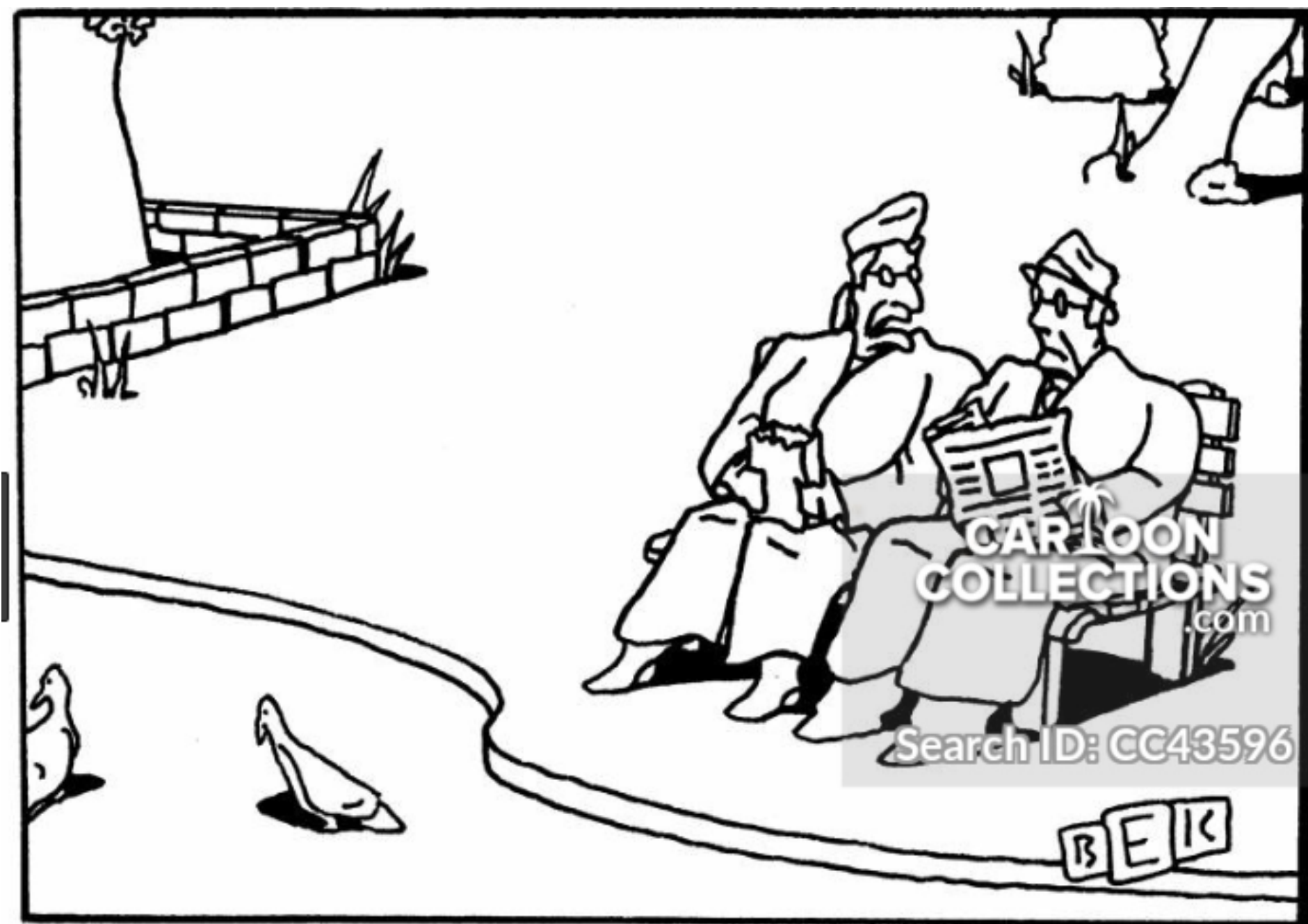
Individuals who already live with anxiety and/or depression may experience a worsening of their mental health, and those who haven't experienced it previously are at an increased and substantial risk.

Baby Boomers and Their Unique Challenges

Adding to the increased life expectancy and the aging of the Baby Boomer generation as factors that result in larger numbers of older adults experiencing mental health problems during COVID-19 isolation are:

- Older people have increased rates of respiratory and other disorders resulting in compromised immune systems.
- In 2015 nearly 57% of adults with psychiatric disorders did not receive treatment
- Baby boomers are afraid that people will view them differently
- They are worried that they will experience discrimination
 - They have been told that mental health problems are a weakness, and not simply a treatable health conditions

Up to now the percentage of older adults with mental health problems has not been rising but for the first time in recorded history the percentage of the world-wide population over 65 years old is rising. In 2010 it was 13% and it is projected to rise to 16% by 2020. (Reynolds et al. 2015)



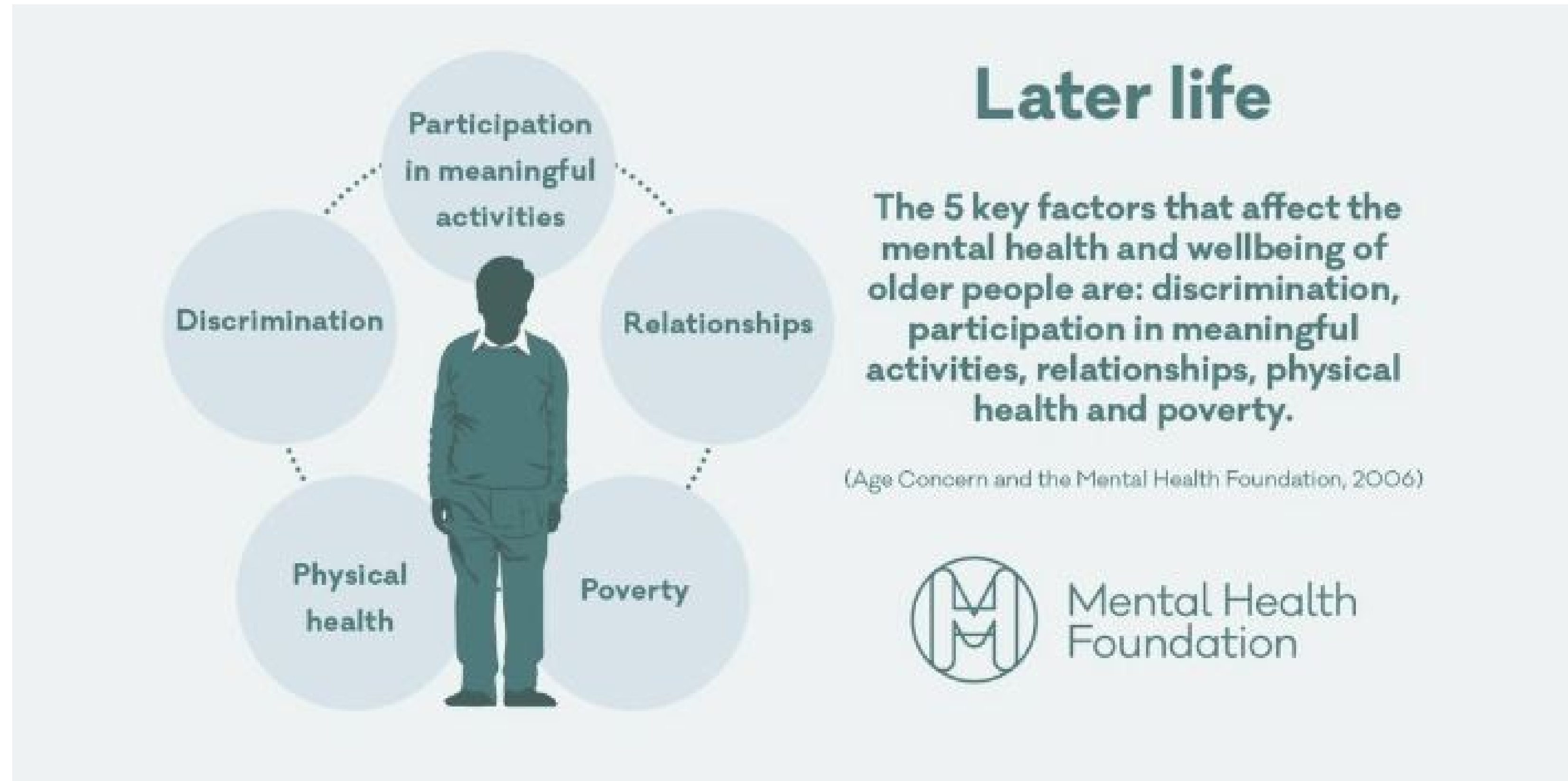
"In my day, people died."

- Between 1970 and 2015, life expectancy has increased from 71 years to 79 years
- People are living longer, including those with mental health disorders
- This results in an overall rise in the number of adults over 65 with mental health diagnoses.
- With the increased loneliness due to quarantines, social distancing, and self isolation resulting from efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 we may see a rise in the percentage of all citizens with mental health problems.

Traditional factors that affect mental health in older adults

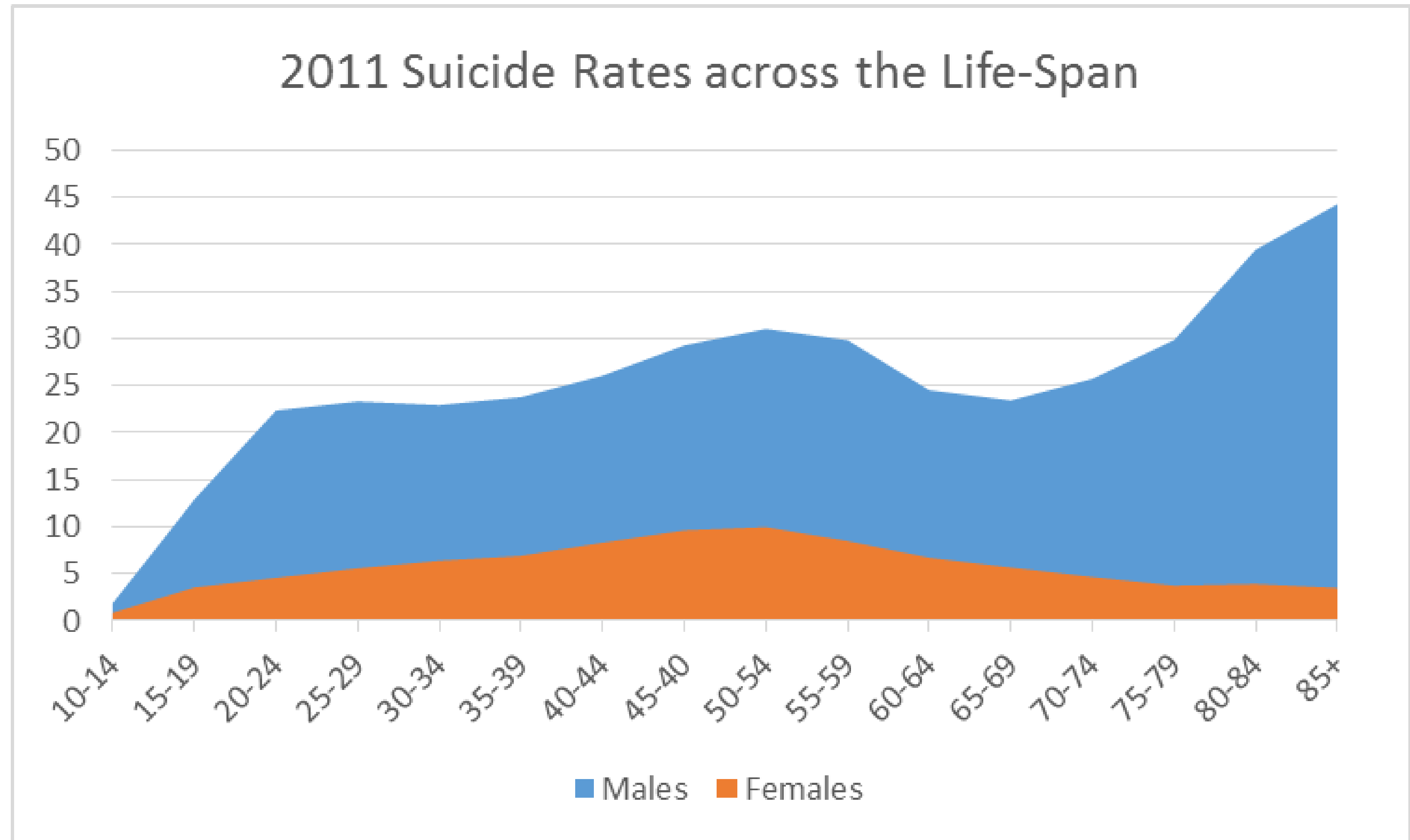
There are many reasons for mental health problems for older adults

- Aging for many is a time of losses and loneliness.
- Societal roles change with retirement and a general devaluing of older adults.
- Physical health problems increase.
- People experience losses of loved ones and friends.
- Financial security is lessened sometimes resulting in drastic changes in lifestyle.



- 20% of older adults in the community may be experiencing mental health problems, primarily depression prior to the current COVID-19 crisis.
- Recent research shows that depression can contribute to the worsening of other chronic health problems which, in turn, creates higher mortality and higher costs in health care.
- In the face of societal imposed isolation and the resulting loneliness it is critical that we provide older adults with skills and tools to stay and even increase their social connections.

Suicide rates for men over 70 are the highest for any demographic group. Researchers have long predicted that the number of older adults committing suicide would increase due, in part, to the aging of Baby Boomers. The primary reason for these higher rates is the prevalence of depression.



So, What Can We Do?

- Many states and organizations are beginning to use peer support for older adults.
- Older adults face many different stressors than younger adults.
- When available a certified older adult peer specialist is specifically prepared to work on issues of aging and the principles of wellness.

“ peer support is real and it is happening and it is going to be bigger and bigger as we move into the future, so pay attention

Joe Pamphilon, Senior Project Worker, CLEAR Peer Support Project

So, What Can We Do?

- Formal peer support is generally only available through mental health agencies and peer run organizations.
- The availability of peer support during this time of crisis is still unknown.
 - Some organizations provide tele-peer support.
 - Contact your local Mental Health America (MHA) affiliate or other mental health organization to find out about peer support in your area.
 - To find the nearest MHA go to: <https://arc.mhanational.org/find-an-affiliate>
 - Many online support groups are available.
 - Support Groups Central is one hub that can connect people with a variety of groups: <https://www.supportgroupscentral.com/index.cfm>

So, What Can We Do for Ourselves ?

- Mental Health America has developed a number of tools as part of its' face to face social connections program, Peer Partners, that can be used on your own.
- The goal of Peer Partners is to help build networks of friends and intimate relationships, thereby creating a strong social support system.
- Positive social connections increase self-esteem and our feelings of self-worth.
- These are critical elements of a healthy life.

So, What Can We Do for Ourselves ?

Here are some steps we can take to feel more connected and supported during these difficult times.

- The first thought for each of us is to reach out by phone, social media, video calling or any other method to people we know and care about.
 - Personal contact is extremely valuable and precious to nearly everyone.
 - People are social creatures and our brains are hardwired to rely on social contact.
 - In these times when we can't have our usual means of contact (social groups, visiting with friends, attending religious services or events, etc.) if we are lucky enough to have people we care about, reach out.
 - Try to set up regular communication. In times of uncertainty knowing there are supports we can rely on is precious.

So, What Can We Do for Ourselves ?

- If a religious organization, social center, or other social connection has been an important part of your life, call them.
 - Many organizations and groups are setting up procedures to support those of us who may be struggling.
- If you feel that you don't have relationships you can draw on there are opportunities for building new ones.
 - Sit down and make a couple of lists:
 - What are your interests? What do you enjoy doing?
 - What type of people are you most comfortable with?
 - Do you think that the type of people you are comfortable with might include ones with the same interests as you?

So, What Can We Do for Ourselves ?

- Make a list of what you feel are your social strengths
 - Are you comfortable talking to new people you meet?
 - Is making conversation easy for you?
 - Do you feel that people find you interesting?
- Make a list of social skills that are difficult for you.
 - Are you shy?
 - Is making conversation difficult for you?
 - Are you afraid that other people won't find you interesting?
- Mental Health America will post a list next week of skill building exercises you can practice to increase your confidence.
 - Things like communication skills and building friendships
 - Coping strategies and expressing your emotions in a healthy way.

So, What Can We Do for Ourselves ?

- Additional skill building tools
 - Requesting and offering assistance.
 - Giving and receiving compliments
 - Building self-esteem
 - Self-awareness.
- Learn to search the internet for groups that appeal to your interests.
 - Next week MHA will post links on searching the internet, and steps to joining groups.
 - We will also post links to resources that help you to safely interact with others on the internet.

So, What Can We Do for Ourselves ?

- Make a list of interesting groups
- Visit them without joining to make informed choices
- Make a plan for joining and participating in online groups
 - Define your expectations
 - If you are new to online groups and feel unsure about participating decide ahead of time how you will begin.
 - Initially you can observe the activities of others in the group.
 - After getting to know the personality of the group and its' participants you can begin to participate to the degree you feel comfortable with.
 - When you begin to feel more comfortable you can choose to increase your participation.
 - Don't forget that you do not have to stay with a group. Look around, maybe there is something that would be more interesting or comfortable for you.

So, What Can We Do for Ourselves ?

Being alone physically doesn't mean we have to be alone socially.

- Many people develop relationships through social media and online group participation.
- Millions of people are having to find new ways to overcome feeling of isolation and loneliness.
 - People are using video connections to have lunch with their friends.
 - Others have found that online games can be an enjoyable and social activity.
 - Celebrate each new step towards feeling connected.
 - Small successes lead to larger ones.

Our New Experiences Will Become a Part of Our Everyday Life Going Forward

Loneliness hurts. Humans experience loneliness in the same areas of our brains where we experience physical pain.

It can feel overwhelming to try to build new connections in new ways, but when we do it is worth it.

Don't accept that you have to be alone, reach out. Let others know that you want to feel a part of the world around you.

You can't go back and change the beginning,
but you can start where you are and
change the ending
C. S. Lewis



Community is the answer!

Contact Us



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