

## Keeping active, stimulated, and connected keeps isolation at bay

- December 19, 2002

By Eileen Beal

With winter whistling down upon us, lots of seniors, especially those living alone, have started a cocooning process that will keep them more or less housebound till the Spring thaw. Cocooning may keep seniors safe from fender-benders, falls, and flu bugs, "but it tends to isolate them, and that can lead to a lack of purpose, boredom, even depression," says Karen Vrtunski, director of Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging's Community-based Long Term Care Program.

The best way to deal with isolation is to stop it before it starts. "Stay active, stimulated, and connected, even while you are homebound," says Vrtunski.

One way to do that is to get a live-in companion-a pet,~ says Vrtunski. The most popular pets are cats, dogs, and birds and they decrease feelings of isolation because "they provide a connection to something that's alive, provide a chance to do some quality nurturing, and they are entertaining, too."

Local animal shelters often have pure-breed animals "for adoption" after the Christmas holidays, says a spokesperson at the Animal Protective League. "People get tired of [the animals] when they aren't cute and fuzzy anymore," she says. "Sometimes they even come with their papers."

### **Bringing outside in**

"Friendly visitor" programs, such as the Senior Companion Program coordinated by Benjamin Rose and/or community-based programs provided through faith-based organizations, match homebound seniors with people their own age for visits that may include chats, stimulating activities, and/or errand running.

Another option for nipping isolation in the bud is to contact organizations and agencies that bring stimulating, engaging, and/or entertaining materials (books or books-on-tape, magazines, movie or entertainment videos or CDs, volunteer projects, etc.) right to your door. Best bets for doorstep delivery: the local library, Cleveland Sight Center, community social service agencies, and the people in charge of "outreach" at the church, synagogue, service, and/or volunteer organizations you belong to.

"People shouldn't ever underestimate their ability to volunteer just because they can't leave the house," said Sue Biagianti, director of Elder Care Services at Beachwood-based Jewish Family Services. Citing everything from coordinating a phone tree to doing in-home tutoring for

## Keeping active, stimulated, and connected keeps isolation at bay

neighborhood children, she added: "There are plenty of meaningful things people can do from their home that will keep them connected to their community or the groups or organizations they support."

Doing volunteer, reading, or hobby activities near a large window for 3 or more hours a day may also help fight off the sluggishness and (sometimes) depression of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), a mood disorder caused by lack of sunlight hitting the skin. "It [SAD] often affects people who are housebound in the winter," said Vrtunski.

### **Reaching out**

The telephone and e-mail also keep isolation at bay. "Having a network of people-or even one or two people-you can telephone or e-mail frequently for a visit is a real spirit lifter," says Biagianti.

For those with arthritis or diminished sight, speaker phones and/or phones with large number buttons and pre-programmed phone numbers are a necessity; for those using e-mail, a large-size monitor and enlarging the resolution of the e-mail program makes for easier reading.

TV can be a time-waster, but it can also be an excellent way to keep current on news and events, said Vrtunski. "If vision or hearing is a problem," she added, "a large-screen TV, or one with closed captioning, is an option."

Community senior centers and senior-focused agencies, especially those that provide transportation to their programs, help keep isolation at bay even when seniors aren't there. "The effects of socializing during a [senior center] visit can carry over for days," explained Vrtunski.

### **Reaching inward**

Developing, or resurrecting, do-at-home hobbies or activities is another way to short-circuit boredom and feelings of isolation. "Those kinds of activities don't just create a routine for the day," explained Vrtunski, "they build things into the day that are stimulating and enjoyable."

So does an in-home workout program. Workouts don't just keep muscles and joints fit and toned during the winter months, they rev up circulation and improve mental outlook because exercise helps the body produce and/or circulate the feel-good hormones serotonin and beta-endorphins.

Deep breathing exercises plus easy-on-the-joints exercises: treadmilling, Tai Chi or Qui Gong (Chinese stretching and toning exercises), or "chairbics" are excellent for home bound seniors and

## Keeping active, stimulated, and connected keeps isolation at bay

so are senior-friendly exercise videos said Biagianti. "You don't have to get out to do a workout," she stressed. "The living room can be a very good gym."

### **Sources and Resources**

#### **For more information on keeping isolation at bay, contact:**

Animal Protective League  
216-771-4616

Benjamin Rose Community Services  
216-791-8000

Cleveland Sight Center  
216-791-8118

Cuyahoga County Department of Senior and Adult Services  
216-420-6750

United Way Services of Greater Cleveland's First Call for Help  
216-436-2000

Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging  
216-621-0303\*/800-626-7277

Eileen Beal, MA, is a freelance healthcare writer specializing in geriatric issues. *Successful Aging* is a service provided by Benjamin Rose ([www.benrose.org](http://www.benrose.org)), a nonprofit social service agency for older adults. If you would like to suggest topics for future columns, please e-mail them to Ms. Beal at [eojb@visn.net](mailto:eojb@visn.net) or send them to Successful Aging, c/o Polly Clemo, Benjamin Rose, 850 Euclid Avenue, Suite 1100, Cleveland, Ohio, 44114.