

Fighting Loneliness

Photo Credit: Sidewalk Talk

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The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated some of the issues and challenges Canadians over 65 face. The social distancing guidelines, which undoubtedly helped protect seniors from the virus, inadvertently increased the risk of another problem some seniors are already facing—loneliness (Holtby, 2020).

Loneliness and Health

The effect of social isolation and loneliness on the mental and physical health of seniors is difficult to measure precisely. However, there is strong evidence to show that isolation and loneliness affect people’s health. Loneliness and isolation exposes seniors to a higher risk of dementia, heart disease, stroke, depression and anxiety. Developing and maintaining social relationships is shown to significantly lessen these risk factors (CDC, 2020). This is why it is important to take the necessary steps to help seniors mitigate these risk factors. However, the pandemic is making connecting difficult, especially for seniors who do not have an online presence. Waiting for these guidelines to lift before actively engaging with seniors in the community may be too late. There are steps that can be safely taken now to ensure that our seniors continue to be active members of the community.

**About 1 in 10
Canadians over
65 feel socially
isolated.**

(Statistics Canada)

Sidewalk Talk

Sidewalk Talk is the brainchild of two San Francisco-based therapists who wanted to address the growing loneliness, violence and inequality in the city. To this end, they decided to set-up some lawn chairs, put up signs and asked pedestrians if they wanted to talk. Sidewalk Talk is a grassroots listening project built by communities. Even with more than 7,000 volunteers in more than 89 locations across 15 countries (LinkedIn, n.d.), the organization maintains their grassroots identity by having independent chapters in locations they operate in. There are 6 chapters in Canada—5 in Ontario and 1 in New Brunswick.



Photo Credit: Sidewalk Talk

Figure 1: A Sidewalk Talk poster

Their formula is simple and effective. Once a week, trained volunteers put lawn chairs along sidewalks and offer free listening sessions to anyone, about anything. Listener and volunteer Myisha T shares (The Alternative UK, 2019):



Figure 2: Sidewalks optional. Indoor spaces can also double as “sidewalks” in the winter.



Figure 3: The work for Sidewalk Talk continues through the pandemic.

“... I was having a depressive episode... I was struggling in my business... online marketing it’s lonely, it’s isolating and I saw this beautiful project on FB and I just hit it up! It’s been a year now... I find myself... connecting with people... It’s truly been life changing...”

A New Take on The Buddy System

Not everyone is comfortable sharing in public and this an apparent gap in the Sidewalk Talk model. Having programs that will include seniors who may not want to participate in group conversations is important. Pairing seniors with volunteers or other seniors they already know can help address some of the reservations people may have with opening up to strangers. A buddy system where seniors can interact online can be set-up if local authorities have health and safety guidelines in place. Buddy systems can be integrated into the seniors’ activities of choice. A walking-buddy system is recommended by the non-profit Saskatchewan Seniors Mechanism (2016).

For seniors who are comfortable meeting people outside their circle, buddy benches can help address loneliness. The city of Edmonton placed buddy benches in elementary schools to encourage inclusion. The success of this pilot spurred the city to expand the project and placed benches across the city in an effort to reduce urban isolation (City of Edmonton, n.d.). Buddy benches with welcoming message posters or stickers can be strategically placed in busy areas.

Safe Spaces

Facing loneliness through the pandemic is an important concern for seniors in Canada (Patel, 2021). While most people are turning to online platforms to fight loneliness and isolation, about 1 in 3 Canadian seniors still do not have an online presence (Davidson & Schimmele, 2019). Because of this, it is important to have safe activities without relying on mobile devices and technology. Masked and distanced sidewalk talks and online buddy hangouts can be implemented safely to help stem the tide of loneliness during the pandemic.

The Future: Smart Homes and Sidegigs

The Sidewalk Talk and buddy bench models are projects communities can immediately implement with little to no capital investment. However, these

“The benches were inspired by a young boy who had a suggestion for his grandmother on how to feel less lonely.” (Csernyik, 2017)

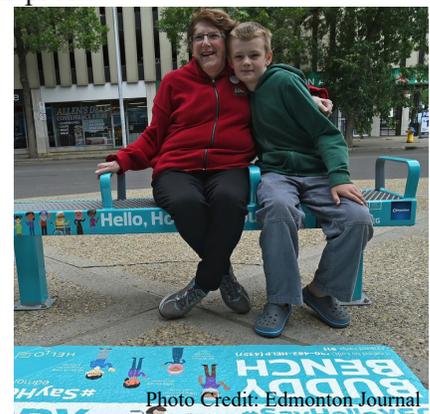


Figure 4: Dianne Kuntz, with her grandson Tommy whose idea it was to use benches to address loneliness.

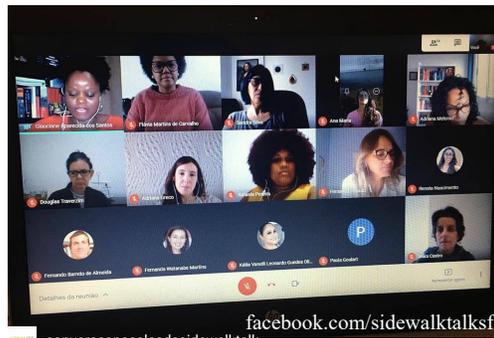


Figure 5: A Sidewalk Talk group in Brazil goes online. This group also doubles as a book club.



Figure 6: Seniors volunteering at a Sidewalk Talk event

“It’s now less about the restoration and more an excuse to leave the house and meet up with her new friends.”(Sanchis, 2018) on Nuria

models might be challenging to sustain in smaller communities where foot traffic is sparse. There is a growing number of technology platforms, mobile devices and social networking sites to help maintain the connectivity of seniors, especially when they are alone at home and vulnerable to loneliness and isolation. Smart homes are homes that have multiple technological devices working within a system to enable domestic task automation, easier communication, and increase security. Research shows that these homes greatly enhance the lives of residents especially those that may be physically and cognitively challenged (Lê, et al., 2012). These tools also allow seniors to easily connect with their friends and loved ones from all over the world. They are also able to make new friends and find new activities.



Figure 7: Nuria Ricart, a retired librarian learned how to restore furniture online. She is now a part-time restorer working at her own pace.

Some tech-savvy seniors in Spain and Latin America are making meaningful contributions to their communities. The concept of having “sidegigs” (alternative sources of income), normally the domain of millennials and zoomers, is slowly being embraced by retirees and seniors. Phyltime, dubbed the Spanish LinkedIn, is helping seniors share their skills for profit or fun, and find new activities. Users simply register, plug in their location and their interests and the app tells them what activities are available. The platform has grown significantly since it was created. There are around 150,000 users aged 50+ on the platform (Sanchis, 2018).

Final Thoughts

Internet usage among Canadian seniors has been growing significantly. Usage rates more than doubled from 32% to 68% between 2007 and 2016. It is likely that this growth indicates that the gap between internet users and non-users will continue to decline as younger cohorts age (Davidson & Schimmele, 2019). With the rise of internet use among seniors likely to continue, it is reasonable to say that smart homes and senior-focused online networks will be the norm. However, there is a pressing need now to reach out to folks who are not fully comfortable going online and using smart technology. In the short term, ideas like Sidewalk talk and buddy benches can make a positive impact, especially in areas that have internet connectivity issues. Reaching out can be as simple as setting up lawn chairs outside people’s homes, along the main street, or in the local grocery store.

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