

THE BEST CHRISTMAS GIFT - YOUR TIME AND ATTENTION

By: Tim Mitchell, Fund Development Coordinator, Senior Care Partners PACE

The holiday season is here! Christmas music began before Halloween and retail bargains were already running at full throttle online and in stores before the Thanksgiving table was set. Hallmark movies are consuming the television watching of throngs of traditional people who still believe in the magic of the season.

Outside of the pushing and shoving that takes place at the malls and retail stores, Christmas is one of the most joyful times of the year! Or is it? It all depends on who you ask. While most people seem to be enjoying the excitement in the air, there are a significant number of people that don't like seeing this time of year roll around. These individuals may see other people spending time with friends and family, and ask themselves, "Why can't that be me?" or "Why is everyone else so much happier than I am?"

In a recent conversation I asked an older gentleman, "What are your plans for the holidays?" He replied, "I'll just be spending them by myself like all the other holidays." That's heartbreaking to hear, yet it is not uncommon.

In some cases, people outlive all their relatives and friends, leaving them with no holiday get-together options. But, more often, older adults have smaller social circles leaving them with fewer opportunities for socialization. Those feelings of disconnectedness will often compound and transition into the actual avoidance of social interactions, especially around holidays. This creates an unfortunate downward spiral because withdrawing will only make the feelings of loneliness and isolation much worse. While holidays are supposed to be a time of joy and celebration, for these people it may have the very opposite effect.

The term used to describe this condition with its many complex symptoms and side effects is "social isolation." There are many people who experience this throughout the year, but it definitely becomes more pronounced around the holidays.

People dealing with social isolation report the following concerns:

- Physical symptoms – aches and pains, headaches, illness, or worsening of medical conditions.
- Mental health conditions – increased risk of depression, anxiety, paranoia, or panic attacks.
- Low energy – tiredness or lack of motivation.

While there is no age barrier to social isolation, it stands to reason that the risk factors for experiencing these feelings become higher as we age. Holidays can also be particularly lonely for the elderly. As people age they start to outlive their spouses, friends, and other family members while their activity levels slow and they find themselves becoming more and more home-bound. As these events unfold, it is very common for seniors to experience chronic bouts of loneliness.

According to government statistics, it is estimated that nearly thirty percent of people over the age of sixty-five live alone and other studies have shown isolation is associated with higher rates of chronic disease, depression, dementia, and death. Again, as one might suspect, detrimental feelings associated with isolation can become more pronounced around the holidays.

While it may feel extremely uncomfortable, socialization is the best response to social isolation. The holidays are great times to get out-and-about. Even if your social sphere is very small, there are great church programs around this time of year that you can enjoy and it will get you in the company of other people. Churches often offer Christmas musicals, an evening of caroling, dramatic plays, and, of course, those very special Christmas Eve services. You might just meet your new best friend at such an event. And, it's

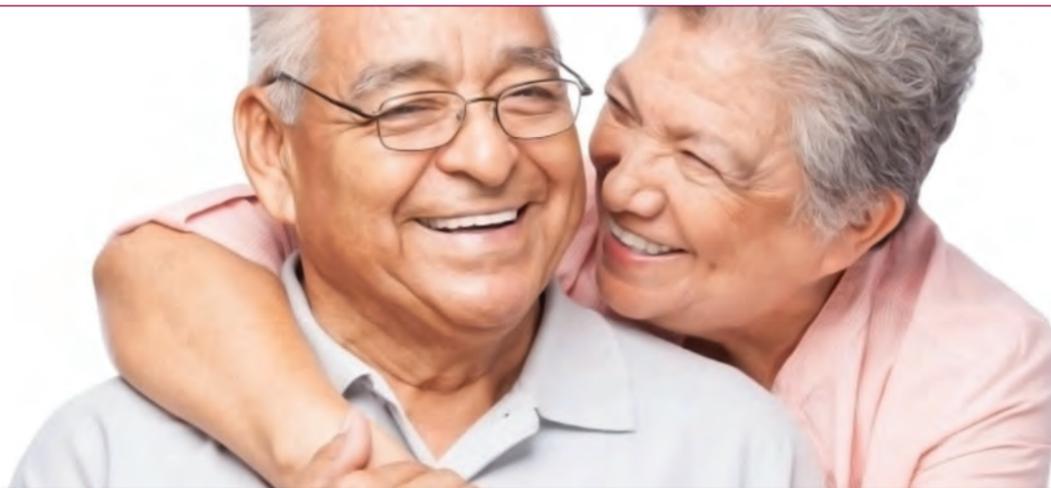
usually free!

Of course, family get-togethers for many may be the most enjoyable. Everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging and we innately need human connection. If you're a senior, make your best effort to connect with others this holiday season. If you have older family members, make sure to visit them or invite them to your home for the holiday. That just may be the best gift you could ever give them.



At Senior Care Partners P.A.C.E we consistently focus on the socialization needs of our participants as a way to address any feelings of loneliness they may be experiencing. We do our best to help them find a sense of purpose and meaning in their own lives, which gives them incentive to work toward improving their overall health. This holiday season brings an opportunity to engage each of our participants in the sights and sounds of the season and hopefully relive some very special holiday memories with them. We anticipate many smiles as we give them the best gift, our time and attention.

As you gather for your various celebrations, may you always recognize the importance and preciousness of each family member and cherish the time you have together.



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