

# Social Isolation & Loneliness Among American Indian Elders



**Social isolation** is defined as a lack of social connections. Social isolation can lead to loneliness in some people, while others can feel lonely without being socially isolated, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

**Loneliness** is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact.

Some Indigenous elders may feel lonely despite how often they receive social contact and some are socially isolated.

The National Indian Council on Aging (NICOA) reminds our elders that they have survived many changes and obstacles throughout their lives. We are strong and resilient!

## We know that Indigenous elders who are socially connected

- Live longer
- Are healthier and avoid such issues as high blood pressure, colds and flu
- Have less hospitalization and fewer trips to the emergency room
- Are happier
- Have protection from or avoid mental health issues, such as dementia and Alzheimer's

## Other resources are available to Native elders

- AARP Foundation Connect2Affect  
<https://connect2affect.org>
- Eldercare.gov
- American Indian/Alaska Native elder programs – Title VI of the Older American Americans Act provides funding for reservation-based programs  
<https://olderindians.acl.gov>
- NICOA Long Term Services & Supports – Listing of various services, programs and resources for tribal elders and their caregivers  
<http://nicoaltsscompass.org>



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**NICOA** | National Indian Council on Aging, Inc.

NICOA encourages elders to become more socially active or seek help to feel more fulfilled emotionally, physically and mentally. We also have programs to help elders learn new skills such as our Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP).

## Studies Show



Social isolation was associated with about a 50% increased risk of dementia.<sup>1</sup>

Prolonged social isolation is as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and is more harmful than obesity.<sup>2</sup>



More than 1/3 of adults aged 45 and older feel lonely.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly 1/4 of adults aged 65 & older are considered to be socially isolated. Older adults are at increased risk for loneliness and social isolation because they are more likely to face factors such as living alone, the loss of family, or friends, chronic illness.<sup>4</sup>



Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4-time increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and 57% increased risk of ER visits.<sup>5</sup>

Poor social relationships (characterized by social isolation or loneliness) were associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.<sup>6</sup>

Heart Disease



Stroke



<sup>1,3-6</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020. Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25663>

<sup>2</sup> Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, Mark Baker. Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review. Perspectives on Psychological Science. 2015. Sage Publishing. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1745691614568352>



# Curbing Social Isolation & Loneliness Among American Indian Elders



As Native people, we are traditionally social and communal. Before colonization, we gathered as families, clans and with our tribal members. As our living changed and we began to adopt non-traditional housing, foods and other ways of living, our mental wellbeing, health and social connections also changed.

As Native elders, we are resilient. Surviving these non-traditional forms of living imposed on us shows we can adapt, create and are stronger than we think even as we age.

## + Choices

- We can choose to be alone and even may like being alone while also being aware that being alone can be a health risk.
- We can decide to learn new skills, re-enter the workforce or find help to ensure that we're being as healthy mentally, physically and emotionally as possible.

## + Assessment

AARP has created a questionnaire to assess whether you are at risk of social isolation and loneliness. Take the health assessment at <https://connect2affect.org>.



*Social isolation and loneliness are not the same.  
You can have social contact but still be lonely.*



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## Activities

The best way to remain independent and healthy is to remain active. Below are some examples to help improve brain and physical health, and curb social isolation and loneliness.

- + Cultural food and traditions – School groups, local senior centers. Connect to share and teach with school groups and your senior center
- + Employment – NICOA's Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) is in seven states and elders can receive training for temporary jobs.
- + Exercise – Walking three times a week for nearly an hour and doing it with a friend helps you stay active.
- + Hobbies – Learning new hobbies or picking back up an old pastime helps keep the brain active, and finding or teaching others helps you make social connections.
- + Social media – Facebook or Facebook groups to connect to family and friends or others with similar interests.
- + Video chats – Keeping in contact through phones, tablets or iPads help keep you connected with family or others.
- + Volunteer – Opportunities to teach traditional activities, language or sharing your time are welcomed in schools, colleges and libraries and other public entities.



People who are 50 years of age or older are more likely to experience many of the risk factors that can cause or exacerbate social isolation or loneliness, such as living alone, losing family or friends, chronic illness, and sensory impairments.



The CDC recommends for adults ages 65+ at least 150 minutes a week of moderate intensity activity such as brisk walking. And at least 2 days a week of activities that strengthen muscles. Other activities include standing on one foot to improve balance.



Becoming a NICOA member helps you keep abreast on aging information in Native America and available resources. Go to [www.nicoa.org](http://www.nicoa.org) to join hundreds of Native elders in living a healthy, independent life.

How do you stay socially active? Find us on Facebook and tell us your tips.



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