



**Age Well** Series

# How loneliness and social isolation increase dementia risk



# About WIHA

- **Mission:** To improve the health and well-being of all people as we age by disseminating evidence-based programs and practices and by engaging in collaborative public health strategies in Wisconsin and beyond.
- <https://wihealthyaging.org>
- **Age Well Newsletter**



# Introduction to Speaker

**Susan H. McFadden, PhD**

Professor Emerita of Psychology,  
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

Fox Valley Memory Project



# How Loneliness and Social Isolation Increase Dementia Risk

Susan H. McFadden

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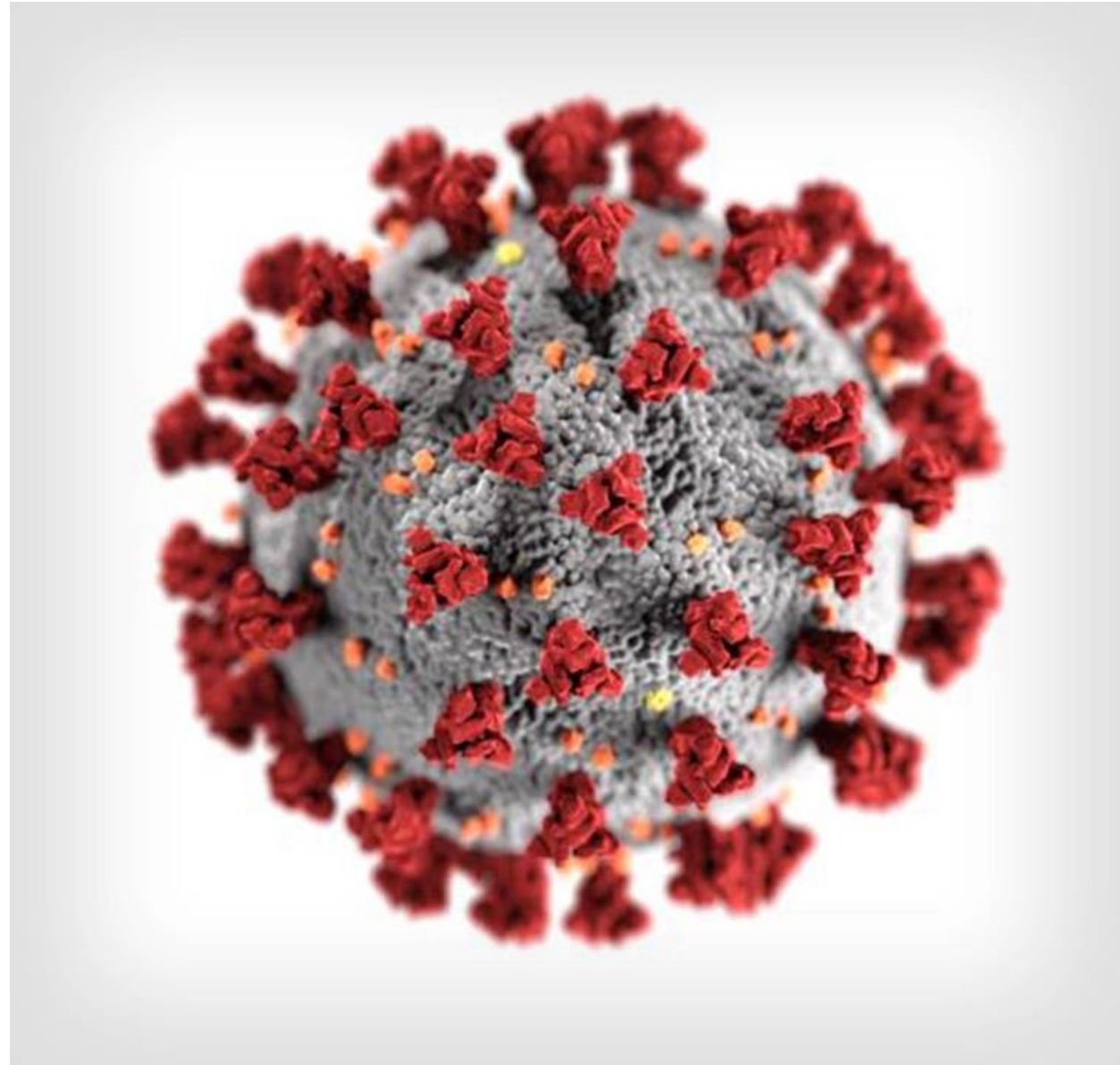


[www.foxvalleymemoryproject.org](http://www.foxvalleymemoryproject.org)

# Topics we'll cover... with a few “quiz” items

- Round images
- A big topic attracting a lot of attention
- Definitions
  - Social isolation
  - Loneliness
- Who is lonely? Who is socially isolated?
- Dementia risk factors
  - It's complicated
- Public health and community connections





*The National Academies of*  
SCIENCES · ENGINEERING · MEDICINE

**CONSENSUS STUDY REPORT**

**Social Isolation  
and Loneliness  
in Older Adults**

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE  
HEALTH CARE SYSTEM**

The National Academies of  
Sciences, Engineering, Medicine  
2020

# Understanding Loneliness and Social Isolation

## How to Stay Connected

From the National Institute on Aging at NIH



## National Institute on Aging, November 2020

### Staying Connected During COVID-19

With the COVID-19 pandemic (global outbreak), maintaining safe distancing precautions has been challenging for everyone — even people who are otherwise well-connected with large supportive social networks.

Public health guidelines to keep physical distance from others have slowed down the spread of COVID-19, but they have also made it harder for people to see family and friends. Older adults are at greater risk of COVID-19, but it is also critically important for them to maintain active social connections. Reach out by phone, video, text, social media, email, or letter to help everyone stay connected during this challenging time. Learn more at [www.coronavirus.gov](http://www.coronavirus.gov).



### COVID-19 Precautions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, take precautions to protect yourself and others. Wash your hands often with soap and water or use a hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available. Stay at least 6 feet from people who are not in your household. Cover your mouth and nose with a cloth face mask when around others. Always cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze or cough, or use the inside of your elbow if you do not have a tissue. Frequently clean and disinfect surfaces that you frequently touch each day. Stay at home when you feel ill. Read more at [www.coronavirus.gov](http://www.coronavirus.gov).



# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation



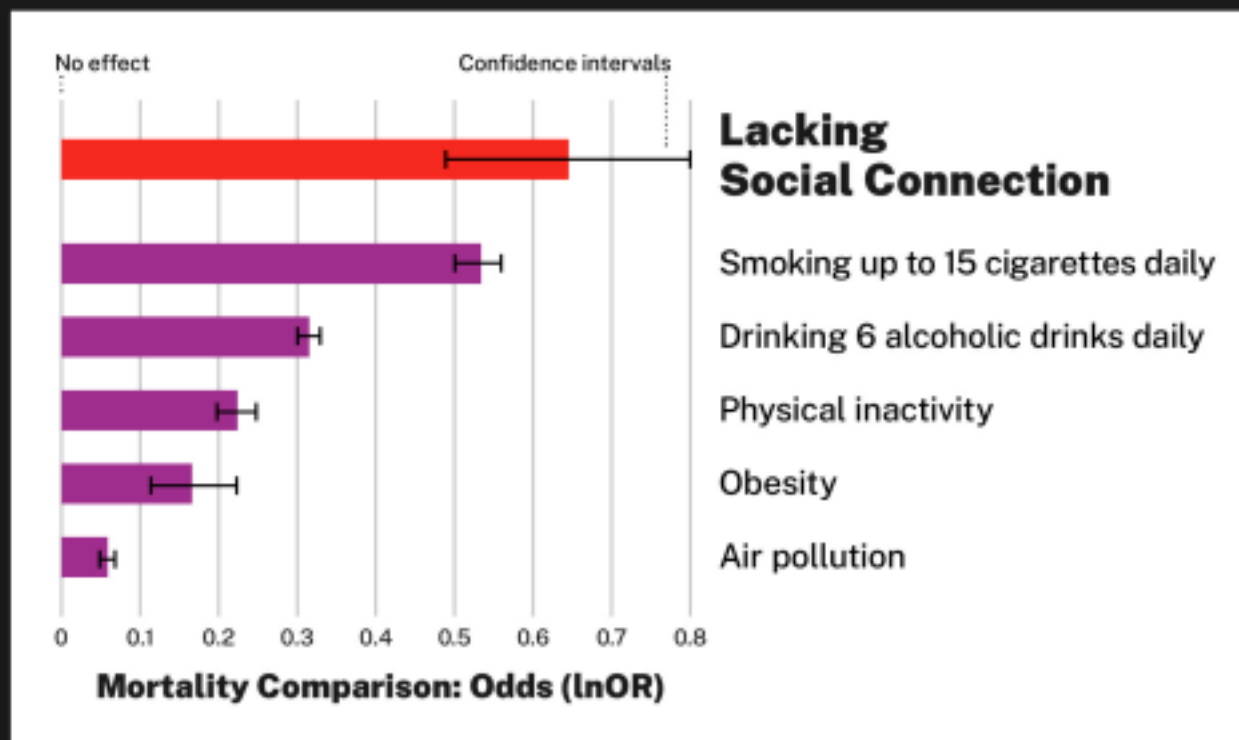
2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the  
Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community



Office of the U.S. Surgeon  
General  
2023

# Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



**Comparison groups:** Complex measures of social integration: high v. low; not smoking v. smoking < 15 cigarettes daily; alcohol abstinence v. drinking > 6 alcoholic drinks daily; physical activity v. inactivity; low BMI v. high BMI; low air pollution v. high air pollution.

**Source:** Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



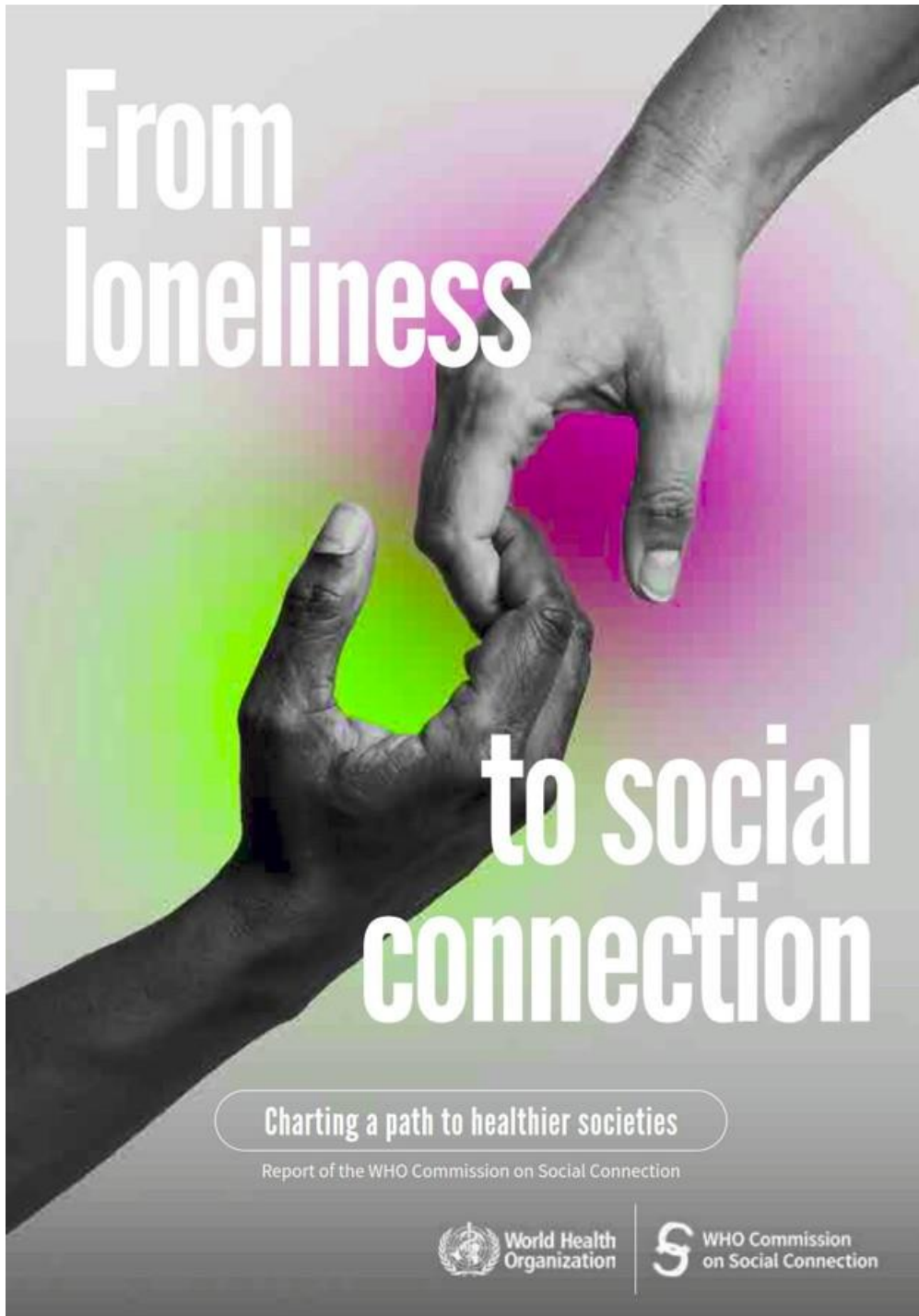
Office of the  
U.S. Surgeon General

SOCIAL CONNECTION  
FACT CARD



**Among older adults,  
chronic loneliness and  
social isolation can  
increase the risk of  
developing dementia by  
approximately 50%.<sup>1</sup>**

1. Lazzari & Rabottini, 2021.



From  
loneliness

to social  
connection

Charting a path to healthier societies

Report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection



World Health  
Organization



WHO Commission  
on Social Connection

World Health Organization  
2025

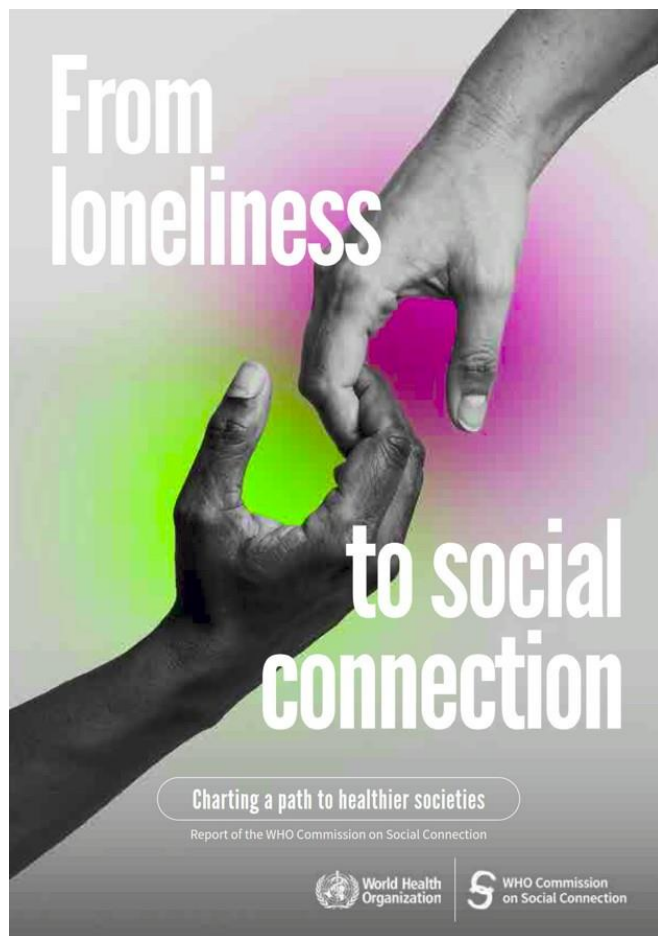
# **Social Determinants of Health SDoH**

# Definitions

- Loneliness
  - The negative emotional feeling that results from a difference between what you desire and what you experience in terms of connection with others
- Social Isolation
  - Lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly

**Who is lonely?**

**Who is socially isolated?**



## From the World Health Organization:

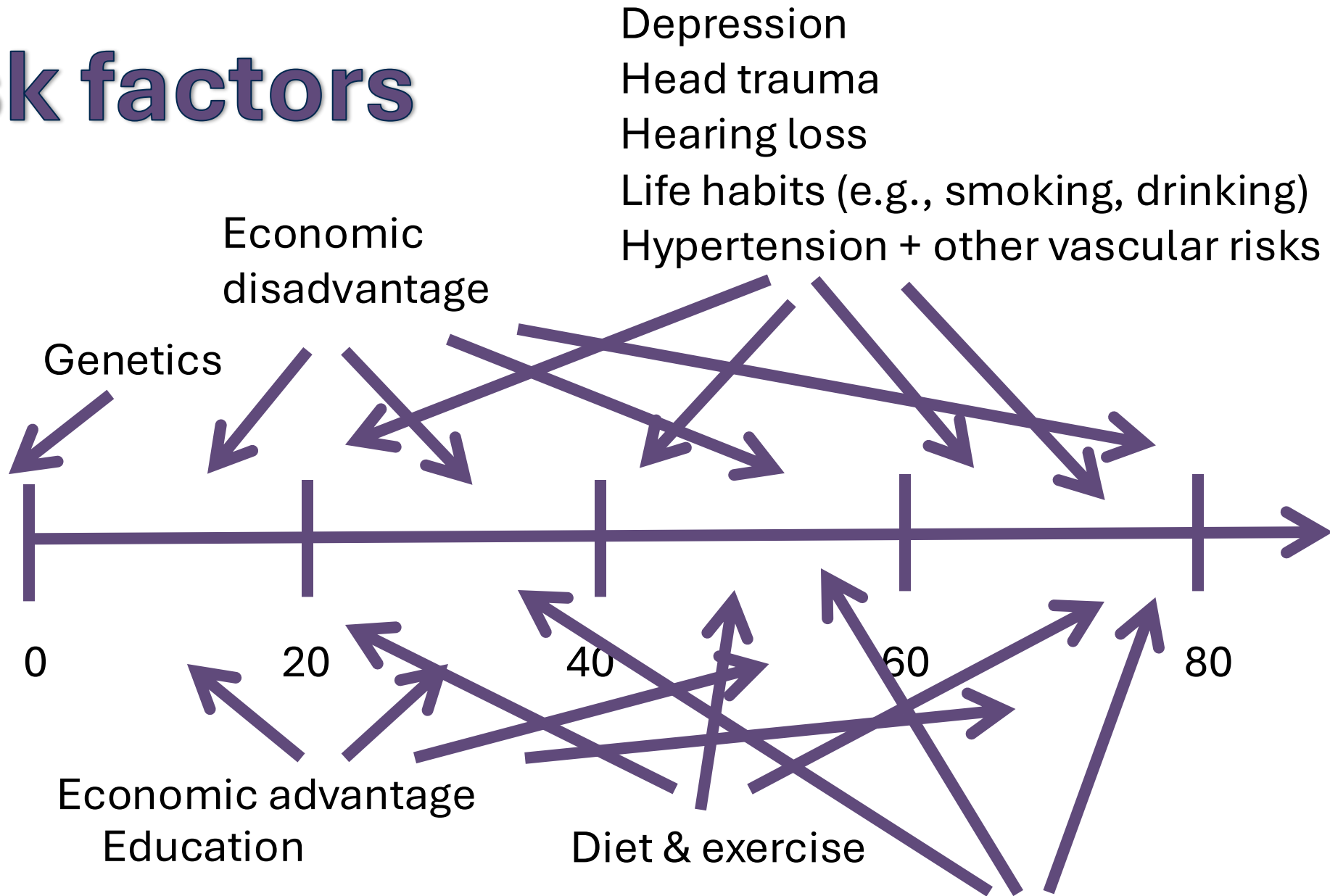
- Loneliness is most common among adolescents and young adults
- Social isolation affects 25-34% of older adults

**What is the connection  
with dementia?**

Dementia is a progressive  
“decline in mental ability  
severe enough to  
interfere with daily life”.

Alzheimer's  
Association

# Risk factors



# Protective factors

Positive social network  
Mental stimulation

Walk to a  
Greek  
restaurant  
with friends!

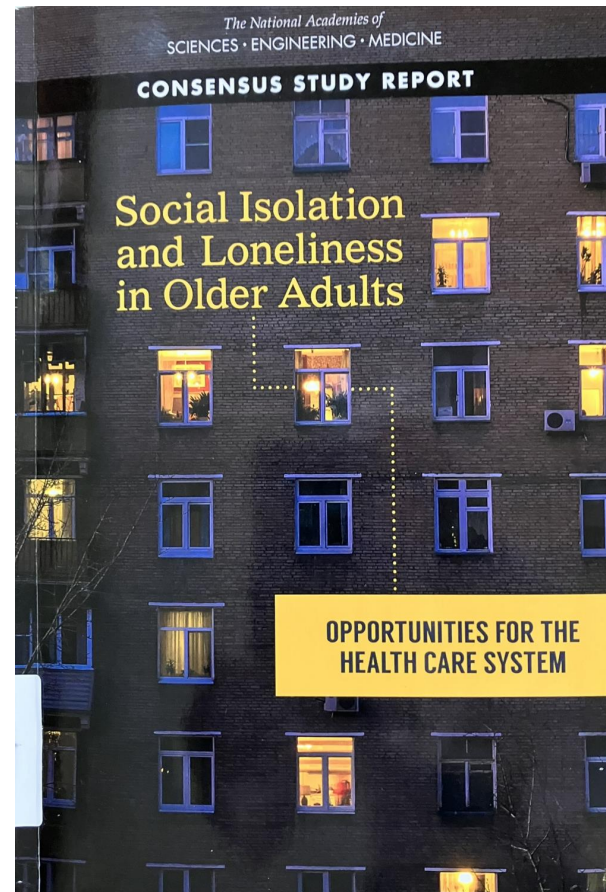


And  
make  
sure you  
can hear  
them!

# Hearing Loss and Dementia

- Hearing loss is the largest modifiable risk factor for developing dementia!
  - More than smoking, high blood pressure, lack of exercise, and social isolation
- Why?
  - The harder the brain works to process sound, the less ability it has to perform other cognitive tasks (like remembering!)
  - Hearing loss can lead to social isolation

“The evidence indicates that less frequent social contacts and lower levels of participation in community groups are associated with declines in global cognition, processing speed, executive function, and visuo-spatial abilities.” (p. 52)



The National Academies of  
Sciences, Engineering,  
Medicine  
2020

**Solutions?**



# Public health

- Arts and health
- Nature and health
- Spiritual practices, participation in faith communities and health
  - Social connections and health

**Social prescribing!**

# Arts & health



TimeSlips™

[www.Timeslips.org](http://www.Timeslips.org)



Nature &  
health

# Spiritual practices, participation in faith communities & health

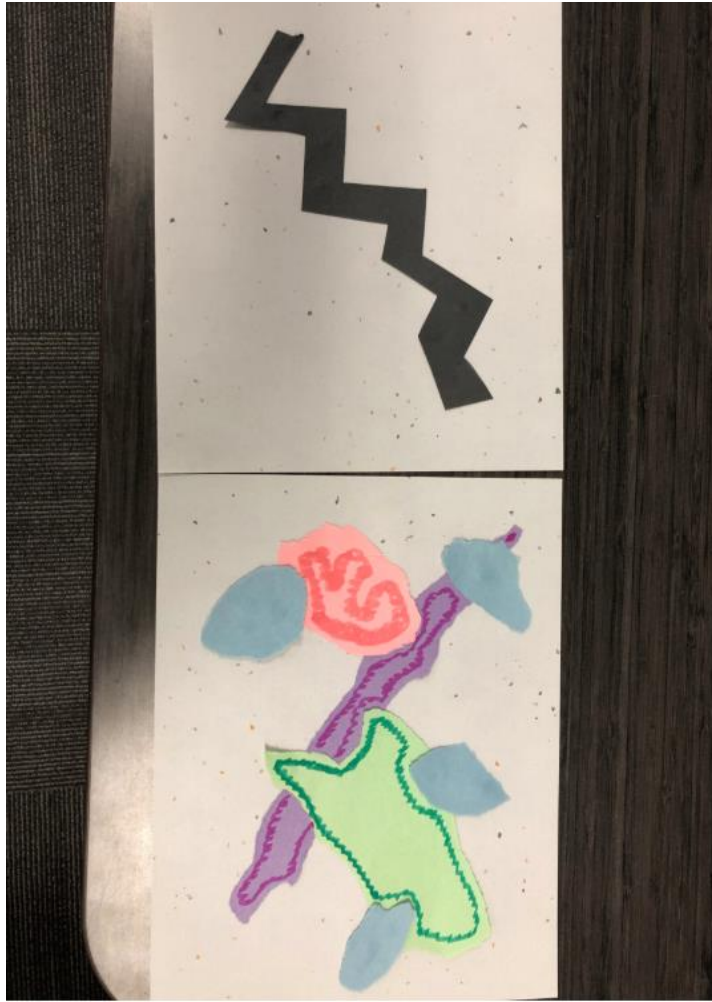


# Memory Cafés



# Social connections & health





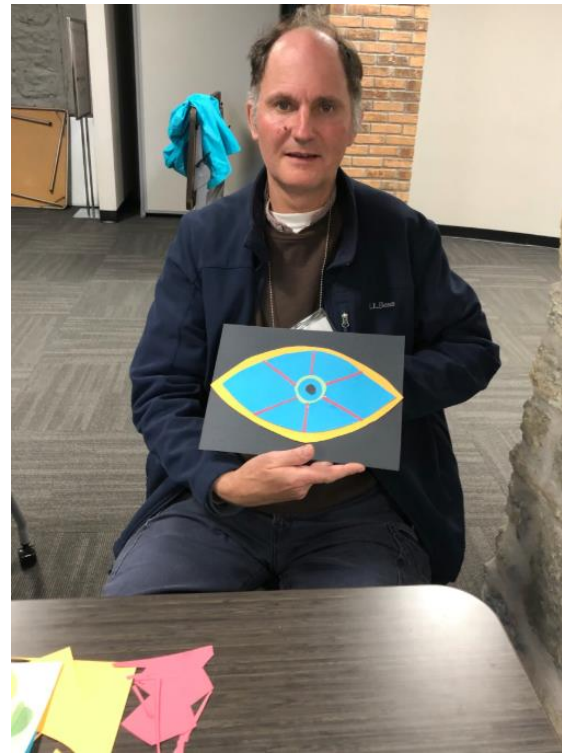
# Loneliness and Connection: An afternoon at a Memory Café



“Loneliness is a form of brokenness, with its jagged, raw edges.”

“Connectedness shares and acknowledges the brokenness and provides support when life spirals out of control.”

Maria Steenepoorte



**THANK YOU!**

# Feedback

- Upon zoom exit
- Share your thoughts
- Complete the eval live & enter to win a t-shirt!



# Found this event informational?

## Please donate to support the Age Well Series!

## Your donation helps to keep this series going!

**Donate Now!**

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− \$5 +

Today Only Monthly

Dedicate My Donation

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<https://wihealthyaging.org/?give=8NDR96EK>



# <https://wihealthyaging.org/find-a-workshop/>

## **Healthy Living with Chronic Pain**

Learn skills and strategies to better manage your chronic pain with this 6-week workshop.

[See Schedule](#)

## **Healthy Living with Diabetes**

Learn skills and strategies to better manage your diabetes in this 6-week program.

[See Schedule](#)

## **Living Well with Chronic Conditions**

Learn skills and strategies to better manage your health and help you to age well in this 6-week program.

[See Schedule](#)

## **Mind Over Matter: Healthy Bowels, Healthy Bladder**

Improve or prevent bowel and bladder incontinence in this 3-session program. (For women only)

[See Schedule](#)

## **Physical Activity for Lifelong Success**

A program designed for those who have not exercised in a while, this 10-week program will help you get started with being active!

[See Schedule](#)

## **Pisando Fuerte**

Aprende como prevenir caídas con este programa de prevención de caídas multifactorial de 8 semanas.

[See Schedule](#)

## **Powerful Tools for Caregivers**

Receive support and learn how to care for yourself as you provide care to another. To find a workshop, visit:  
<https://www.powerfultoolsforcaregivers.org/class-type/wisconsin/>

[See Schedule](#)

## **Stand Up for Your Health**

Sitting too much can be bad for your health. Learn how to sit less and stand more with this 4-week program.

[See Schedule](#)

## **Stepping On**

Learn how to prevent falls with this 7-week multi-factorial fall prevention program.

[See Schedule](#)

## **Tomando Control de Su Salud**

Learn skills and strategies to better manage your health and help you to age well in this 6-week program.

[See Schedule](#)

## **Vivir Saludable con Diabetes**

Learn skills and strategies to better manage your diabetes in this 6-week program.

[See Schedule](#)

## **Walk with Ease**

This 6-week walking program helps you to become more active, reduce pain from arthritis, and live better.

[See Schedule](#)



# Q&A



# Next for Age Well Series

• June 24 11-12pm

Age Well series

## The Science of Purpose

How Meaning Supports Health & Well-Being



Purpose gives our lives direction—and science shows it also supports better health, brain function, and overall quality of life. In this engaging presentation, we'll explore what researchers have learned about the benefits of having a sense of purpose, including its positive impact on cognition and brain health, mental well-being, resilience, and aging well. Attendees will leave with practical ideas for recognizing and nurturing purpose in everyday life, helping to support both emotional and cognitive vitality at any age or life stage.



Stacey M. Schaefer, PhD  
University of Wisconsin  
Institute on Aging

**June 24, 2026**  
**11-12pm CST**  
**FREE WEBINAR**

[Register Here](#)