

The loneliness of growing old...



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British Government announced last year that it was appointing a 'Minister of Loneliness' to address the issue of isolation and loneliness among a large section of the country's population. The intervention came after a report publicised that more than nine million people in the country often or always felt lonely. In Australia, a political party has raised a demand for a similar intervention to tackle the problem of entrenched loneliness among Australians.

Loneliness is a sad reality of modern life. The problem is even more severe among the elderly who for a variety of reasons get adrift from their social networks and communities as they age. According to a 2017 study by Agewell Foundation that surveyed 15,000 people across 300 districts in India, 47.49% of elderly people suffer from loneliness. With an increasingly ageing population, India is also staring at a loneliness epidemic. Loneliness is a critical problem that needs to be addressed through a variety of ways:

The hazards of loneliness Among older people, loneliness is associated with increased cognitive decline, depression, worsening of health, and more doctor visits. A British study found that deficiencies in social relationships are associated with an increased risk of developing coronary heart disease and stroke. Loneliness is also associated with an increased incidence of mental health issues and increased risk of chronic health issues such as diabetes. A 2017 research concluded that greater social connection is associated with 50% lower odds of early death. The same study found that social isolation, loneliness, or living alone boosted the chance of premature death at least as much as obesity.

Ageing and increasing isolation

In India, we have occasionally read news reports of children living abroad failing to connect with a parent back home, only to discover that he/she died and went undiscovered for days. As people age, they tend to get disconnected with their social circles. Increasing physical limitations, dependence on family coupled with the onset of debilitating ailments such as arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, etc, contribute to the social isolation of the elderly. As retirement cuts people out of work-life, their daily social interactions reduce drastically. Gradually, older people also witness the sorrow of the passing away of their spouses, friends and other near and dear ones. Physically weak and cut off from friends, they increasingly tend to feel lonely and depressed.

Measures to address the challenge

According to a 2017 report by the UN Population Fund, around 20% of India's population will be 60 years and older by 2050. Evidently, we need to put in place substantive measures that can address the growing concern of isolation to make ageing a happier phase of life.

Promoting healthy ageing

Though most elderly people eventually do experience health problems, older age should not automatically imply dependence. We need to work towards raising awareness among people about healthy ageing by adopting healthy lifestyles, good dietary practices, focus on physical fitness and preventive medical care. Promoting healthy ageing will imply a healthier older population that is less dependent and fitter.

Building social support networks

The problem of loneliness can be tackled to a certain extent by creating social support systems for the elderly. Much like we have RWAs for social communities, we must also have old age association wherein senior citizens of a community can bond, make friends and build a network of people around them even if they stay alone, away from their children. Such support systems and friendship chains are critical for the overall well-being of the elderly.

Giving them a purpose

Ageing is a subjective phenomenon and there is no universally accepted age that is considered old among or within societies. What we do know is that people are living longer and healthier lives today as compared to 20 years back, thanks to huge advancements in medicine. We must work towards converting this phenomenon of ageing into an opportunity that offers us a huge resource of an experienced and wise population whose contribution can be leveraged in nation-building. Launching initiatives that engage the elderly in productive social work can go a long way in reducing isolation. It will also provide them a sense of purpose and value in life.

For example, an initiative that engages senior citizens of a community to launch a support group for underprivileged children will allow them to teach those kids, guide them towards productive careers and gain satisfaction from this effort.

Building a more conscious society

While the government and social organizations must do what they have to, it is also important to build a society that respects and cares for its elderly. As a society, we need to shun stereotypes associated with ageing, remove ageism from our midst and look at senior citizens as a reflection of our own tomorrow.

