Loneliness and the Aging Population

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**Introduction**
- Loneliness is the negative feeling an individual has resulting from perceptions of shortcomings in one’s social resources or poor quality of social relationships.
- Loneliness is found to be as detrimental to your health as smoking and obesity. It has also been linked to depression, cognitive decline, and mortality.
- More than 40% of people over the age of 65 report feeling lonely.
- Retirement, bereavement, social isolation, and disability are key events occurring later in life that put one at risk for loneliness.
- As the baby boom generation reaches retirement, the aging population is increasing, as a result, long-term healthcare for seniors is expected to cost the U.S. over $126 billion per year.
- Combatting the effects of loneliness throughout the aging process has been shown to mitigate psychological and physical distress, increase life satisfaction and longevity, and reduce healthcare costs.
- Additional research is warranted in order to optimize intervention strategies to address the growing issues of loneliness in the aging population.

**Objective**
- To create a grant proposal aimed at the development and testing of a community-based intervention program to effectively manage and reduce feelings of loneliness in the aging cohort.

**Grant Proposal Process**

**Step 1**
Synthesize research data on loneliness in the aging population in order to create a research review.

**Step 2**
Identify commonalities among successful intervention strategies used to combat loneliness in the aging population.

**Step 3**
Convene a community stakeholder meeting to address the content, recruitment, delivery, and communication of the intervention.

**Step 4**
Combine the findings into a research proposal in order to gain grant funding from various health organizations.

**Research**
- The aging population (65+) is expected to double by the year 2050.
- 40% of these elders report feeling lonely.
- Loneliness is linked with various psychological and physical health problems and can shorten life expectancy.
- Social isolation in the aging cohort is estimated to cost the U.S. health system $7 billion dollars.

**Intervention Strategies**
- Group interventions containing a physical or targeted activity component, targeted groups for intervention (women, the widowed, caregivers, disabled), and a facilitator who phased-out of the intervention were most successful.
- Living Well with a Disability Guide is a validated intervention program that helps address secondary conditions (anxiety, depression, loneliness) and building a positive outlook for those with disabilities.
- Bridging this intervention to the aging population is an appropriate leap for effective management of loneliness as many of the secondary conditions are similar between aging and disability.

**Community Stakeholder Meeting**
- Issues of social isolation and loneliness are prevalent across all demographics.
- Need for intervention within 5 years of retirement.
- Goal is to recreate meaning in one’s life post-retirement and to give individuals tools to manage distress from occurring life events.
- Community-based interventions in assisted living facilities, churches, etc. address the barriers of transportation, maintenance, and retention.
- Intervention should include stimulation, a targeted activity, or common goal.
- Providing individuals with a forum to be less isolated can help those overcome physical disabilities and limitations.
- Peer led interventions, intergenerational matching, and maintaining groups with similar interests, SES levels, and history.

**Research Proposal**

**Objective**
- To test a novel community-based intervention program for effective management and mitigation of feelings of loneliness and social isolation in the aging population.

**Hypothesis**
- Post-intervention test measures will show a reduction in feelings of loneliness compared to baseline scores.
- Post-test scores on self-rated physical health will also improve as a result of intervention.

**Method**
- Participants will include 150 older adults (65+) living within the Missoula community.
- Recruitment will be obtained through assisted living centers for those who want to participate in the effectiveness study, physician referral, and brochure.
- Assessment will include the UCLA Loneliness Scale and a Likert scale questionnaire of self-rated psychological and physical health.
- Measures of self-rated health and loneliness will be assessed pre and post-intervention.
- Intervention will occur once a week for 10 weeks, with each session having a topic, and lasting 2 hours.
- Intervention will be led by a trained facilitator who will slowly phase-out during the intervention.
- Intervention topics will be structured based on activity interests or outcome goals of participants.

**Anticipated Results**
- Results from this study are expected to show intervention with a targeted activity component will help reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation, as well as increase self-rated physical health in older adults.

**Discussion**
- Results from this study are important as they will help optimize intervention strategies for combating loneliness in the aging population. Throughout the aging process, many inevitable events occur (bereavement, retirement, disability, etc.). The point of this novel intervention is to help individuals find ways to manage and cope with these events in healthy, positive ways, while also maintaining a sense of purpose and connection to a community. This is important for mitigating distress and increasing longevity in the aging population.

**Potential Sponsors**

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