Combating Loneliness: An Intergenerational Pen Pal Program

Hailey Powell  
*University of Montana, Missoula*, hp136620@umconnect.umt.edu

Addie Slanger  
*University of Montana, Missoula*, as137620@umconnect.umt.edu

Maria Goheen  
*University of Montana, Missoula*, mg149496@umconnect.umt.edu

Brenna Spurling  
*University of Montana, Missoula*, bs136969@umconnect.umt.edu

Mazana Boerboom  
*University of Montana, Missoula*, mb136571@umconnect.umt.edu

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Mitigating the Damaging Effects of Covid-19 Isolation in the Elderly

Mazana Boerboom, Maria Goheen, Hailey Powell, Addie Slanger, Brenna Spurling
The Problem at a Glance

Older adults, however, were especially affected. 24% of this population is socially isolated even without the pressures of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone to take a step back, isolate, and distance themselves from loved ones. This step back put all populations at greater risk for negative side effects of loneliness.
Loneliness and COVID-19

- One study found that loneliness is a literal “social pain” after looking at MRI scans.
- Loneliness can lead to increased depression and anxiety disorders (Knopf, 2020)
- Loneliness levels more related to duration of isolation, rather than intensity (Knopf, 2020)
- High levels of loneliness increase chances for a decline in physical health
Loneliness in Older Adults

- COVID-19 has exacerbated loneliness among the elderly.
- Older adults are more at risk of dying from COVID-19
- The elderly living in nursing and assisted living homes are at a much higher risk
Quality, intergenerational social connections have proven effective at loneliness mitigation. The most effective activities used to target loneliness were group bonding activities, educational lessons, and skill development classes. COVID-19 required a more indirect approach. Pen pal programs have been proven effective.
Global Context
OUR EFFORTS
What:

- We gathered the most compelling sections of our research, from loneliness warning signals to preventative measures, in a brochure.

Where:

- We distributed that to the Curry Health Center’s Wellness Program and our senior living facility partners.
Pen-Pal Program
Who, What, Where, and When:

- Over the course of six weeks, February-April, we instituted a pilot pen pal program.
- We connected students in honors and seniors in assisted living homes in Missoula.
We exchanged

~40

letters in 6 weeks

Our Implementation

We matched people based off interest surveys and hand delivered the letters between students and residents.

The How?
CHALLENGES

COMMUNICATION

FACILITY PARTNER SELECTION

TIMELINE

INTERPRETING RESULTS
Feedback Survey
Questions

- What are your initial thoughts or opinions about this six-week program?
- What do you wish this program could have offered?
- What would you change about the program?
- What worked well for you?
- Would you participate in this program again?
I thought this pen pal program was a wonderful idea. I think the elderly oftentimes go unnoticed.

-Honors Student

Great way for opposite ends of the ages to communicate...I got very lucky with the pen pal that was assigned to me.

-Senior Resident

It's a great program, but a little more challenging with residents with dementia. Some days were good and some days were not...It was a good program. Please continue doing this.

-Senior Living Staff

I really liked it. She was an interesting young lady. I enjoyed hearing about her life and sharing some of mine with her.

-Senior Resident
MOVING FORWARD
Working with HSA

- Plans to start program in the fall
- Opening up the program to all members and any other students who are interested in participating
- Loose structure with more opportunities to write

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High levels of loneliness increase chances for a decline in physical health
Conclusions and Questions