

# A Review on Recreational Therapy among the Elderly to Prevent Social Isolation and Loneliness: A Concept Paper

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## ABSTRACT

Recreation includes all the activities done in the leisure time for enjoyment or relaxation to refresh the mind and body and improve overall well-being. Recreational therapy is the treatment that can reduce stress and enhance happiness and fulfilment in life. Ageing has become a global issue which causes changes in physical, social, mental, and physiological processes. Loneliness and social isolation have emerged as critical risk factors for adverse health outcomes, including mental disorders, cardiovascular disease, and cognitive decline<sup>1</sup>. Studies also reveal that loneliness and social isolation can impact the central features of the brain and cognitive ageing<sup>2</sup>. There are various causes of social isolation and loneliness, which can be individual, family-related, or societal. It is usually the perceived causes rather than the actual causes for social isolation and loneliness<sup>3</sup>.

**Conclusion:** The targeted interventions of recreational therapy (e.g., art and craft, brain exercises, cooking and baking, outdoor activities, music therapy, and pet therapy) can improve socialization and creativity. This approach can prevent social isolation and loneliness among the elderly before they lead to adverse health outcomes<sup>4</sup>.

**Keywords:** Recreational Therapy, social isolation, loneliness, ageing.

## INTRODUCTION

Recreational therapy can be used for all the age groups, from the newborn to the elderly. The simple lullabies, rocking the baby while putting them to sleep, skin to skin contact helps them in their development. The experiment by Harvard's Music Lab have

found that the babies reacted to lullabies in unfamiliar language and tune. The infants were also relaxed<sup>5</sup>. The preschoolers and toddler's recreational therapy includes playing with building blocks, matching colours which improve their motor skills. School aged children love playing outdoor

games, bicycle riding, team games which improve their team building skills, learn to share and care for the others. It makes muscles stronger, more agile, faster, and more powerful<sup>6</sup>. Adolescents love technology-based activities and adventure games which builds their confidence and skill. Studies identify positive outcomes for adolescents who use different types of digital tech, including the internet, social media, and video games<sup>7</sup>.

Older adults love gardening, taking care of pets, cooking and baking, art and crafts which can bring about positive health outcome and address patient's health needs. The benefits of horticultural therapy and garden settings is reduction of pain, improvement in attention, lessening of stress, modulation of agitation, lowering of PRN medications and antipsychotics and reduction of falls<sup>8</sup>.

Population ageing is a global phenomenon, and India is also experiencing growth in the number and proportion of elderly individuals in its population. This demographic change is positively influenced by reduced infant and maternal mortality, a reduction in communicable diseases, and better control of non-communicable diseases. People now live longer than before.

However, this shift has led to economic, physiological, and psychological challenges,

as well as an increase in crimes against aged persons. According to the World Health Organization, by 2030, one in six people in the world will be aged 60 years or over. Loneliness and social isolation are key risk factors for mental health conditions in later life.

Social isolation, defined as the relative absence or infrequency of contact with different types of social relationships, and loneliness, defined as perceived isolation, are associated with adverse health outcomes. For instance, a systematic scoping review of four databases demonstrated a direct association between social isolation, loneliness, and coronary heart disease and stroke mortality<sup>1</sup>.

A longitudinal MRI study of 1,992 cognitively healthy participants (aged 50–82 years, with 921 women) found that changes in social isolation were associated with smaller hippocampus volumes, reduced cortical thickness, poorer cognitive functions (memory, processing speed, and executive functions), and greater social isolation after six years<sup>2</sup>.

### **CAUSES FOR SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS AMONG THE ELDERLY**

- **Disability:** A cross-sectional study was conducted on adults age between 16-64 years with or without disability to examine

exposure to three indicators of low social connectedness which includes loneliness, low perceived social support and social isolation. Results: People with disability, economically inactive and living alone experienced loneliness, low perceived social support and social isolation at significantly higher rates than people without disability<sup>9</sup>.

- Living alone: In India approximately 5.7% of India's senior citizens (aged 60 and above) live alone without the support of the family or friends. Older people who stay alone are prone for increased health risk due to negligence<sup>10</sup>. In contrast united states about 27% of adults aged 60 and older live alone, a figure higher than the global average of 16%<sup>11</sup>.

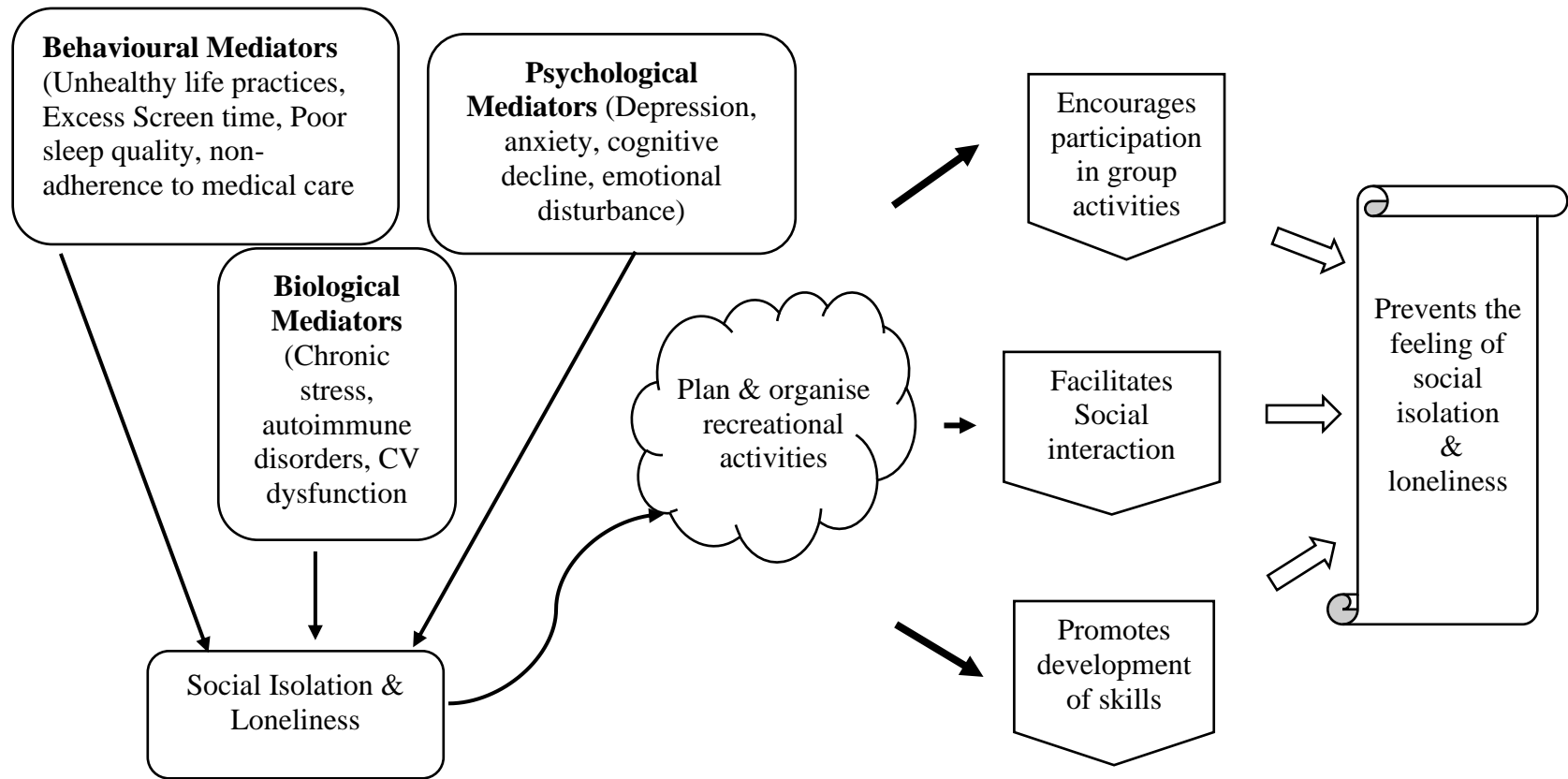
- Limited finances: Financial shock, an unexpected and sizeable loss of income or wealth, is a stressful experience. The individuals who experience financial loss are prone to feeling shame about what are perceived as personal failings, which negatively affect relationship quality, and can

cause people to actively withdraw from others, or to engage in self-protective emotional distancing in social relationships, thus increasing the risk of loneliness<sup>12</sup>.

- Never having married: A study was conducted on 131 unpartnered men and women between the ages of 65 and 75. It was found that older men and women without a partner are more vulnerable to loneliness than married men and women because the presence of a spouse or a cohabitant facilitates social interaction and it is an important source of emotional well being<sup>13</sup>.

- Transportation challenges: A study conducted in Los Angeles where 500 adults aged 50 and older were interviewed found that the transport challenges have led to loneliness epidemic for seniors. One of the top three causes of loneliness were stated as “I don’t have a means of transportation to go to places I need to visit”<sup>14</sup>.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



### KEY MEDIATORS LINK SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS WITH HEALTH OUTCOMES

The causes can be categorized into three key mediators which is linked to social isolation and loneliness. The three key mediators are behavioral, psychological, and biological mediators:

**Behavioral Mediators:** Unhealthy lifestyle practices, physical inactivity, poor sleep quality, and non-adherence to medical care.

Unhealthy lifestyle practices like smoking, alcohol intake brings antisocial behaviour and discord in the family.

Excess of screen time, work from home options for adults, online shopping all these have led to limit the physical activity. This has led to various chronic diseases symptoms like joint pain, muscle weakness, fatigue causing disengagement from social activities.

Poor sleep quality can cause confusion, reduced alertness, fatigue, memory loss which can lead to social activity deprivations.

Non-adherence to medical care can cause chronic conditions requiring hospitalisation and financial constraints due to treatments. These behavioural mediators cause the elderly to become dependent on the care givers which can lead to social isolation and loneliness.

**Psychological Mediators:** Depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, and emotional disturbances.

Depression can lead to various psychological changes in the elderly. People who are depressed feel less motivated to do any day-to-day activities they feel they are worthless, get fatigued easily and make avenues to keep themselves isolated & lonely.

Elderly person with anxiety lack confidence they feel they are always judged by others. Fear grips in why taking any decisions. They always develop a behaviour of avoiding people, crowd and difficult situations and feel comfortable being alone.

Cognitive decline can cause memory loss, confusion and poor concentration, repeating the same sentences and situations. So, when

they are mistreated or reminded of their memory loss they can end up in misunderstandings & conflicts. Hence, they try to disengage as a solution for their cognitive decline.

Emotional disturbances with mood swings can disrupt family relationships & they try to isolate themselves

**Biological Mediators:** Chronic stress response, autoimmune disorders, and cardiovascular dysfunction.

Chronic stress has greater impact on all the system of the body. It can increase the blood pressure level, hormonal imbalances, increased blood sugar level, skin allergy, weakens the immune system leading to chronic condition like cold, cough & breathing difficulties. These situations can cause wear & tare of the human body and the elderly feel irritable, anxious, or withdrawn, causing them to avoid social situations.

Autoimmune disorders like arthritis, SLE, multiple sclerosis can lead to physical disability, fatigue and stigma among the elderly. Physical limitations can make individuals feel physically separated from others, contributing to isolation.

Cardiovascular diseases can cause reduced mobility, fear of exertion, non-adherence to medications is common among the elderly causing exacerbation of the diseases. Fear & anxiety regarding the disease condition and the prognosis makes the elderly difficult to maintain social connections leading to depression and social isolation & loneliness.

## **RECREATIONAL THERAPY FOR THE ELDERLY CAN PREVENT SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS.**

**Arts & Crafts:** Activities such as drawing, painting, sculpting, knitting, or creating something using wood, cardboard, and other materials mentally and physically stimulate the person and provide a sense of accomplishment once the artwork is completed.

A workshop conducted in Norwich with a collage of colour and creativity for 4 weeks (12 March– 7April 2018). People of all ages, with and without disabilities, were encouraged to attend. There was a plethora of interactive demonstrations, and activities that included block cutting, print making, knitting, painting, sewing, spinning, weaving and sculpting. As a result of the workshop, some participants felt encouraged to attend a group or adult education class, encouraging social interaction, which can help to combat social isolation and loneliness<sup>15</sup>.

**Cooking and Baking:** Many older people, especially those living alone, cease cooking for themselves, even if they cooked daily in the past. Cooking and baking stimulate all five senses and are highly effective parts of recreational therapy.

In 2016 cooking skill of older Japanese men and women aged  $\geq 65$  years was assessed using a scale with good validity. Social relationships were evaluated by assessing neighborhood ties, frequency and number of meetings with friends, and frequent meals with friends. Individual-level social capital was evaluated by assessing civic participation, social cohesion, and reciprocity. Women with high-level cooking skill were 2.27 times (95% CI: 1.77–2.91) more likely to have high levels of neighborhood ties and 1.65 (95% CI: 1.20–2.27) times more likely to eat with friends, compared with those with middle/low-level cooking skill. Improving cooking skills may be key to boosting social relationships and social capital, which would prevent social isolation<sup>16</sup>.

**Outdoor Activities:** Getting out of the house for light physical activity is another critical part of recreational therapy. Activities like walking, swimming, birdwatching, and light gardening can increase energy levels, improve muscle strength, optimize balance, and boost mood. Even a simple trip to a café can benefit overall well-being. A group based physical activity helps to prevent social isolation and

loneliness by improving levels of social connectedness in older adults<sup>17</sup>.

**Music Therapy:** Listening to music reduces stress and promotes cognitive function. Singing, dancing, or playing instruments can trigger happy memories, improve mood and encourage socialization. A study was conducted on 38 elderly individuals who stayed in a nursing home. 19 in intervention & 19 in control group.

The population of the study consisted of 104 elderly individuals who stayed in the nursing home between the dates of the research, and the samples were 38 elderly individuals (19 interventions, 19 controls). A pretest, Interview Form and UCLA Loneliness Scale were applied to the elderly individuals in both the intervention and control groups. Elderly individuals in the intervention group together listened to instrumental music for 30 minutes for 10 days, both in the morning and evening. After the intervention UCLA Loneliness Scale was applied to both the intervention and control groups as a post-test. It was determined that music therapy applied to elderly individuals living in nursing homes is effective in reducing the level of loneliness<sup>18</sup>.

**Pet Therapy:** Building a relationship with a pet is rewarding for older adults who feel lonely or have difficulty socializing. Pet therapy reduces stress and signs of depression, making it an effective part of recreational therapy. A cross-sectional data was collected from 9856 community-dwelling older adults in Japan. The results suggest that the experience of dog ownership may be effective to improve the psychological health among socially isolated older adult<sup>19</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The biological, Psychological and behavioural mediators can lead to social isolation and loneliness among the elderly. But if appropriately planning is done and the care takers or the family members organise recreational activities like art & craft, cooking & baking, outdoor activities,

involve the elders in playing musical instrument or listen to music and based on the interest pets can be kept at home or even stray animals can be taken care.

When the elders get engaged in the recreational activities it encourages them to be part of the group, facility social interaction and this can also promote development of skill which can be used for earning their living.

The outcome of this therapy will prevent the elderly from getting affected with loneliness and social isolation and they can be productive in the society. This can reduce the burden of the care givers, family members and make the world a better place to live.

### **Declaration by Authors**

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