

CARING FOR THE ELDERLY

My RETIREMENT

A WALL COLLAPSED ON HER IN THE NIGHT AND RATS ATE SOME OF HER BODY PARTS BEFORE THE FAMILY FOUND OUT THE NEXT DAY

Loneliness: The silent monster killing our old ones

BY HILARY BAINEMIGISHA

After looking after my old father and watching him deteriorate in the last 10 years of his life, I feel compelled to share, warn and alert everybody about the silent killer of senior citizens called loneliness.

In planning for old age, most of us ignore loneliness yet it can break a soul into pieces. No wonder it is used in prison as a punishment for hard-core criminals.

According to *A Recipe of Social Isolation* by Nicholas R. Nicholson published in *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, the elderly who are lonely "may become irritable, depressed, miserable, demanding, quiet and disengaged."

"This leads to suicidal tendencies, health problems, low immunity, depression, disgust with everything and makes them more susceptible to other issues which may accelerate their death!"

Dr Carla Perinnetto of the University of California, San Francisco, analysed numerous recent studies on loneliness and data from the US National Institute on Aging's Health and Retirement and found that 22.8% of the elderly, who described themselves as lonely, died during the six-year study period. An additional 25% experienced significant decline in health.

According to a research by Abel Nwabona, James Ntzi and Gideon Rutemwa, loneliness among the elderly is becoming a big concern in light of the weakening extended family system which used to be a source of social support. In their research published online in 2015, 605 elderly persons were interviewed in a 2012 cross-sectional study. They found that about seven in every 10 elderly

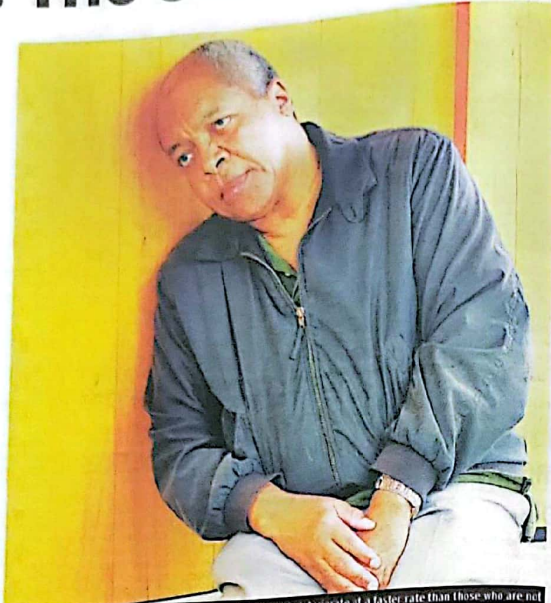
persons felt lonely. "The breakdown of community resource systems has led to isolation of the elderly and, as a result, many suffer from loneliness, stigma, physical and mental abuse as well as discrimination and neglect," Nwabona says.

THE STUDY
The research, which was carried out in Kampala, Mukono, Tororo, Lira and Kisumu districts, revealed that the elderly in the urban areas were more likely to be lonely than those in the rural settings. Those who were widowed were also more likely to be lonely. According to the study, the absence of children, poor health, television and pension benefits led to loneliness. Those living with their spouses were likely to feel less lonely than those living with their children or with their relatives. Studies also suggest that those in poor housing conditions were more affected.

LONELINESS ON THE RISE

According to Nwabona's research, in most urban areas in Uganda, the elderly need good healthcare yet their children are preoccupied with work. The elderly are always left with the house-help or children, who are detached from them. Even in rural areas, people leave the elderly at home and go to gardens. Apart from lacking people to talk to, the elderly find problems getting help to move around or take medicine.

Nwabona says during the research, he found many elderly people living alone in huts and old houses. He explains that lack of a household companion or helper makes it difficult to access safe water. It also implies inability to repair their semi-permanent and makeshift structures. Many times, the walls, floors and roofs have cracks,



Elderly persons who are lonely are likely to have their health deteriorate at a faster rate than those who are not

which expose them to coldness and harmful insects.

"The elderly persons in solitary living hardly seek healthcare," he says. "In situations of conflict and emergencies, they are left behind to become victims of disasters."

But to the individual, this loneliness translates into worry, psycho-social health problems, propensity to smoking or taking alcohol, sleeping and inactivity. Many elderly who smoke or

at the University of Chicago, who studied loneliness for 30 years, reveals that seniors who feel lonely are more likely to report poor health. The US Department of Health says lonely seniors are more likely to die faster. People above the age of 60, who reported feeling lonely, saw a 45% increase in the risk of death. They also had a 59% greater risk of mental and physical decline than their more social counterparts.

LONELINESS AND HEALTH
Dr John Cacioppo, a neuroscientist and psychologist

CHANGE IN SOCIAL SETTING
In her book, *Old Age Mental Health in Uganda*, Dr Betty Kyaddondo says loneliness among the elderly has a negative effect on health. The senior population and head of the department of family health and traditional medicine, and the social support system, which the odds of old age are diminished.



Young people should give the elderly company to ensure they stay cheerful

HOW TO COPE WITH AGE

Volunteering at social events whenever you can is another way to occupy yourself while bringing to light the needs and the things you can be thankful for. Do not abandon your hobbies. Many hobbies such as compound gardening, making art and crafts, music or watching sports are possible even when you are old. If you are a soccer lover, get cable TV to follow European tournaments. Learn to love computers as a way to stay in touch, especially with your grandchildren.



TV can reduce loneliness among the elderly

Residual illnesses and conditions from loneliness include chronic lung disease, arthritis, impaired mobility and depression. A study published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*, between elderly loneliness and increase in systolic blood pressure over a four-year period. These increases were

independent of race, ethnicity, gender and other possible contributing factors. Perceived loneliness also contributes to cognitive decline and risk of dementia.

"We evolved to be a social species. It is hard-wired into our brains and when we do not meet that need, it can have physical and neurological effects," Cacioppo says.

age, have diminished. "Many elderly persons develop mental illness and have to rely on family and friends for support. The caretakers themselves need regular counselling, lest they develop psychological problems too. The caregivers are usually not educated on the fundamental aspects of mental healthcare, so they worsen the problem."

COPING MECHANISMS

All of us know that we may end up being one of those old individuals being ignored by the society we helped build! Our children will be grown-ups, busy with their own lives, liberated, self-sufficient and considering us as a disruption or an inconvenience. Their contact will become less and our ideas, concerns and advice will be routinely ignored. The feeling that you are useless, not needed and belittled is obviously devastating.

HOW TO CARE FOR THE ELDERLY

During a research by Nwabona, the elderly were asked how loneliness could be fought and many suggested capital to help them start something to keep them occupied. Families should think of an easy activity that interests their old parents. Such things may include cattle or crafts making which will keep them hopeful.

But above all, the elderly need companionship. The young should improve a radio or TV to keep the elderly occupied if they have to leave them alone. Nevertheless, it is important to know that people need to talk to others and that lack of another human being is a big factor.

The traditional kinship and friendship was a way of fighting loneliness among the elderly but now, modernity has eroded it. It is advisable to keep in touch with your elderly parent, especially when they are sick, bedridden or have just lost a close person.

Even when you are busy, give them a call, until they are unable to use the phone. Maintain frequent contact and remember all their milestones like birthdays or wedding anniversary.

VISIT THE ELDERLY

Whenever you can, visit in person and exchange hugs. Research shows that friendly platonic touching from friends makes you feel less stressed and promotes feelings of well-being.

People deprived of touch experience the opposite. So, weave a friendly hug into your greetings and farewells. If your aging parent is difficult, and if hospital emergencies, leisure activities and fellowships if you can.

More affluent families can have pets for their elderly. Pets love unconditionally, they are accepting and do not criticise or judge. They forgive and they give pleasure. In non-affluent families like rural pastoral communities, older persons enjoy being with cattle. Research by Dr Wurzinger among the Bahima of southwestern Uganda discovered that the more time an elderly pastoralist spent in contact with cattle, the happier and better his immunity and ambience were. The Bahima communicate with their cows, which sometimes respond and in that way, become companions and make their elderly masters less lonely. Loneliness can also be mitigated through fellowships with other elders

whether for prayer, companionship or elderly activities. If it churches started elderly caring projects and activities, the senior citizens would have company, feel useful and live longer, healthy lives.

Check out community resources for elders at church, club facilities or private organisations. We have a few caregiving organisations like Uganda Reach the Aged Association, The Child and Elderly Support Organisation, Joy For Elderly Care - Uganda, Uganda Rural For Elderly Support, HelpAge and Uganda Reach the Aged Association.

Take your aging parents to events they may enjoy such as concerts, theatre, community festivals or comedy shows. It may be classes, outings and social functions, church fellowship, health clubs, civic and service organisations, educational classes, travel clubs, and special interest groups. Start with the things your elderly has liked in the past as you discover more from friends, online and care giving organisations.

Many elderly persons need counselling, which is non-existent in our traditional set up. Counselling is useful in identifying tailor-made solutions to individual loneliness. Families that can afford should bring in a counsellor to talk to their elderly.

Ntzi advises families taking care of the elderly to work on the transportation issue. Lack of adequate transport is a primary cause of social isolation, he says. Because many seniors do not drive, and public transportation is a problem, their mobility is hampered. Provide a car for hospital emergencies, leisure activities and fellowships if you can.

NEED FOR NATIONAL POLICY
Nwabona and group recommended the formulation of a National Policy for Older Persons which, among others, prioritises interventions that address lack of opportunities to socialise. In Uganda, things look good for the elderly. There is a department for the elderly in the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and it has a national policy for older people. The Constitution prescribes a "reasonable provision for the welfare and maintenance of the aged", but the reality is much different. The country lacks financial resources and the political will to effect the paper demands.

3 QUOTABLE QUOTES



A person is a person because he recognises others as persons.

Desmond Tutu
South African social rights activist and retired Anglican bishop



I have retired, but if there's anything that would kill me it is to wake up in the morning not knowing what to do.

Nelson Mandela,
Former president of South Africa



Exposure from a young age to the realities of the world is a super-big thing.

Bill Gates,
Co-founder of Microsoft

FIGHT LONELINESS

If you are a senior citizen feeling lonely, you may also feel that the world owes you companionship. Often, this is not true. You need to make your own effort to fight your loneliness.

Meet new people, make new friends, especially among your fellow elderly colleagues.

Volunteering at social events whenever you can is another way to occupy yourself while bringing to light the positives and the things you can be thankful for.

Do not abandon your hobbies. Many hobbies such as compound gardening,

making art and crafts, music or watching sports are possible even when you are old. If you are a soccer lover, follow European tournaments on TV. Learn to love computers as a way to stay in touch, especially with your grandchildren.

In many developed countries, and in many affluent families in Uganda, technology is used to entertain senior citizens on computers and phones. There are computer games that stimulate the brain.

However, you need to get trained and interested in computer before it becomes difficult.