

OLD AGE AND LONELINESS – By Chandubhai Radia, San Antonio, Texas

As we all know, people who we are closest to are our informal “safety net”, so to speak. In this country, not every Desi has a large, extended family and as a result, close friends have become the safety net. Even back home in India or East Africa (where I come from), despite the fact that almost everybody had a large extended family, close friends were still very important for most people but in this country, especially, close friendships are even more important. Friends give our life definition, meaning and pleasure. Then, as we get older, our social activities change to the some extent and relationships with family and friends become stronger. As our children grow up into adulthood, they move away and the frequency of our day to day contact with them decreases. This is when close friends take an even more significant role in our lives.

When I say close friendships, I mean the type of friendship where we can comfortably discuss our intimate stories and feelings, important financial and personal matters, including family matters. We need “close” friends who can provide us help, support and advice, especially at critical times in our lives. These close friends are usually those whom we have known for a long time and whom we see (or used to see) at least once a week if not more often. But the disheartening news is that while our community is growing in every city in this country and the numbers of “acquaintances” and casual friends we make are growing, the number of “close” friends is shrinking and dwindling.

While associations, organizations and large groups help bind us together as a community or for a cause, they cannot replace the closeness and “personal” attention that close friends are able to provide. As a result, many older people are feeling isolated and are becoming depressed. For older people, loss of a friend or dilution of friendship that was once very close, is very difficult to deal with. The dilution of closeness between two or more once very close friends can result from misunderstanding or from changed circumstances (e.g. divorce, death of a spouse or a loved one, financial catastrophe for one and financial bonanza for the other). There are many other reasons for dwindling friendships in this modern age.

Why is the number of close friends dwindling? One reason can be the time constraints because of work, family, travel and even technology – technology because people tend to spend more of their “relationship time” on the cell phones and computers which keep them in contact with family, friends and acquaintances in far away places at all times. While these gadgets – cell phones and computers and Blackberries – have helped us keep in touch more often, they have also been responsible for “isolating” people and for diminishing the closeness amongst friends and family. These gadgets cannot replace the intimacy of personal one-on-one visits which helped build the “deeper” relationships in the past. The one on one and face to face friendships are far more sustaining than any other type of relationships.

The biggest challenge is that as these close friendships diminish, who can the older folks talk to about personal important matters, especially as they get older and become isolated? Who will they be able to count on?

How can the younger generation help their aging parents to make sure that do not become lonely?? I think the least the young generation can do to help their aging parents from feeling lonely and depressed is to take the time to sit down with them at dinner time (if they are living with you) or on a leisurely weekend and talk about things of interest to THEM – i.e. their parents. If they are living away from you, make it a point to call them at least once or twice a week and, whenever an opportunity arises (e.g. long weekend, Eid, Christmas, Diwali etc.), make it a point to visit them and, during the visit, make sure that they are number one on your list to spend MOST time with. Take them out on walks, go on family picnics or take them to a shopping mall and, most important of all, join them in doing what THEY ENJOY.

One disturbing trend I have noticed especially among desis in this country is that the young married adults – even those not living with their aging parents and most of them don’t – “exploit” their parents by burdening them with the chore of baby seating day in and day out. Grand parents love their grandchildren but there is a limit as to how long they can “put up” with the young, energetic children. Grand parents may not complain but they do tend to run out of energy and get frustrated if they are burdened with long hours of baby seating.

There are times when people in their "mid-life" prime - people in their thirties, forties and even fifties, especially MEN in our desi culture - feel overwhelmed when they have to take care of two generations - young and the old. His children are becoming adults and his parents are in their seventies and eighties and are requiring more and more attention. He and his wife are now not only responsible for their parents but they have to take care of their own children and also have business/profession and work to take care of and have social and other responsibilities too. Their whole life is a series of responsibilities and they feel overburdened. They feel squeezed in a vise like grip between two generations and, as a result, some times tension begins to develop in their relationship with their aging parents. The dangerous thing about bitterness – whether it is with friends or family - is that it eats away at us like acid. Not only does such bitterness corrode our relationships, it also eats away at our own souls. This is when it is very important for both the “mid-life” adult children and the aging parents to make sure that there is no breakdown in communication or antagonistic confrontations with each other because that can easily lead to depression.

And what can the aging generation do to help themselves? One of the first things they must do is to avoid total dependency on others, especially children who, sooner or later will be going on their own. In India and even in East Africa, adult children were automatically expected to take care of their aging parents but that is not so in western countries where not only the culture but also the circumstances are very different. Another thing the senior citizens should do is to reach out to other people of the same age or similar interests and get to know them. They have to start doing this before their children start leaving home and/or before their old friend circle starts dwindling for whatever reasons. This way they can replenish the pool of close friends.

Now, this is not as easy as it sounds. Also, depending on their comfort level, encourage them to seek “virtual friends” on the internet. Most older people have sufficient free time at their disposal. Learning simple computer skills is relatively easy and the computers have the potential to open the doors to a variety of social contacts – e-mail, chat groups, volunteer groups and many, many more. Not only that, computers allow them to remain in constant contact with their loved ones – children, grand children, relatives in India, friends etc. Not only do the computers help them make new friends and maintain contact with family members all over the world, they also help keep their minds busy.

In conclusion, if the senior citizens – people over sixty - want to avoid loneliness and depression, it is very important that in they maintain close friendships with more than a couple of people and engage in regular activities with their friends and family.