

The blessing of reaching out to the elderly

By Sister Constance Veit, lsp

The COVID-19 public health emergency has officially ended and summer promises happier times in the months ahead.

And yet our surgeon general, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, has just issued an advisory signaling a new public health threat in our country.

The issue is loneliness.

It's actually not a new problem at all, but an invisible epidemic that has been spreading through our society unchecked for many years.

In an essay in the *New York Times* in April, Dr. Murthy asserts, "We need to acknowledge the loneliness and isolation that millions are experiencing and the grave consequences for our mental health, physical health and collective well-being."

Dr. Murthy warns that loneliness is "more than just a bad feeling." It often leads to anxiety and depression – but that is not all.

It is also associated with increased risk of heart disease, dementia and stroke. Loneliness carries with it a more significant risk of premature death than either smoking or obesity!

Dr. Murthy also noted that social disconnection is linked to reduced performance in the workplace and at school as well as diminished social engagement.

To combat this epidemic of loneliness, Dr. Murthy proposes a three-pronged national framework aimed at rebuilding social connection and community.

The first point in Dr. Murthy's plan is to strengthen our social infrastructure through programs, structures and policies that support healthy relationships.

The second point is to renegotiate our relationship with technology – we need to learn to put down our devices in order to be more present to each other.

Third, each of us needs to reach out and rebuild relationships in our personal lives.

Although all three elements are important, I'd like to focus on the third point in this framework – our personal relationships – and I suggest that we begin by reaching out to the elders in our families and neighborhoods, many of whom suffer from a lack of meaningful relationships, though they have many gifts to share with others.

Summertime brings with it many opportunities for family-centered events – graduations, weddings, reunions, picnics and vacations – but do we always make the effort we should to include our elders, especially if they have mobility, communication or memory issues?

The summer months can be a dangerous time for seniors, especially those below the poverty line and those who live alone.

Heat waves quickly become deadly for seniors who lack air conditioning as well as those who have chronic conditions that make it difficult for their bodies to acclimate to temperature fluctuations.

For example, rising temperatures can cause renal failure in persons with kidney problems and they exacerbate dehydration from medications like diuretics, which are commonly prescribed to older persons.

Twenty years ago hundreds of seniors died in Paris and other French cities during a summer heat wave, seemingly forgotten by family members who were away on vacation.

French society was criticized for this obvious neglect of the elderly but similar incidents have recently occurred in our country with seniors dying in their own homes due to a lack of air conditioning during periods of extreme heat.

Many U.S. cities have now set up public cooling centers and regulations for air conditioning in public housing.

But the first line of defense for vulnerable seniors should be the attentiveness of family members and kind neighbors.

For many years Pope Francis has been challenging us to live in a greater spirit of solidarity by reaching out to those both near and far, especially those on the peripheries of society.

He often directs our attention to the needs of seniors, condemning neglect of the elderly and calling on us to strengthen bonds between the generations.

The first time he spoke publicly about the elderly was at World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro in 2013.

This summer Pope Francis will join young people for World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal.

He has intentionally linked this celebration, whose theme is focused on the Virgin Mary in the Visitation, to the third World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly, which falls just a few weeks prior to the events in Lisbon.

As we prepare for these two celebrations this summer, let's stay close to the seniors in our lives, strengthening our emotional and practical bonds with them and remaining attentive to their wellbeing.

We will be blessed as we reach out to them, just as Mary was blessed in her encounter with her elderly cousin Elizabeth.

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