

March 2022

Growing Young: The Effects of A Student-Led Organization On Senior Isolation

Victoria Stoffel

Drexel University College of Medicine

Rim Saab

Drexel University College of Medicine

Argishty Mirzakhianian

Drexel University College of Medicine

Youssef Zaki

Drexel University College of Medicine

Robert Promisloff

Drexel University College of Medicine

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.towerhealth.org/t-med>



Part of the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stoffel V, Saab R, Mirzakhianian A, Zaki Y, Promisloff R. Growing Young: The Effects of A Student-Led Organization On Senior Isolation. *Transformative Medicine (T-Med)*. 2022; 1(1):19-20. doi: <https://doi.org/10.54299/tmed/vyul8760>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Tower Health. It has been accepted by an authorized editor for inclusion in Transformative Medicine (T-Med).

Growing Young: The Effects of A Student-Led Organization On Senior Isolation

Keywords

Loneliness, elderly, student-led, nursing homes and assisted housing facilities

Growing Young: The Effects of a Student-Led Organization on Senior Isolation

Victoria Stoffel¹, Rim Saab¹
 Youssef Zaki¹, Argishty Mirzakhanian¹
 Robert Promisloff¹

1. Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA

Published March 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic affected us in many ways. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable individuals in our society were the most impacted. Specifically, senior citizens and those confined to nursing homes. This pandemic shed even more light on the insidious cycle of depression and loneliness among nursing home residents. The prevalence of severe loneliness among older people living in care homes is at least double that of community-dwelling populations¹. Compared to depression overall in older adults, depression in nursing home residents is even more prevalent².

Depression is one of the most common psychiatric disorders among older adults, and depressed nursing home residents are at a particularly high risk of a decreased quality of life, increased disability, functional decline, heart disease, increased utilization of services, death-by-suicide, and non-suicide mortality³⁻⁵. Unfortunately, depression affects 7% of older adults around the world at least once in their lives, and one-quarter of suicides involve people aged 65 years or older⁶. Preventing loneliness and depression in institutionalized elderly individuals becomes as crucial as managing any other health condition. This became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, where nursing home residents became even more isolated to ensure their protection. Thus, more attention needs to be focused on this population considering, efforts to decrease loneliness can significantly improve their quality of life.

Awareness of this resonated very personally to myself and some of my classmates, especially when we think about our grandparents. Our grandparents that live in different countries (Brazil, Lebanon, Egypt, and Armenia), communicated to us how lonely and sad they felt during such challenging times. After facing a hard year of the pandemic, the rigors of first-year medical school, distance from our loved ones, combined with increased awareness of depression amongst this vulnerable population, we decided to attempt to make a small difference. This is when we had the idea of “Growing Young – Friends Across Generations Student- Led Group” and our goal was to develop a partnership between Drexel University College of Medicine with nursing homes in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. We were extremely grateful that two nursing homes opened their doors to us. During the year of 2020, we developed a pen-pal system, where Drexel medical students exchanged letters with the residents (*Table 1*), and as a Christmas treat to our residents, we gifted them personalized hygiene kits. This year with the loosening of COVID-19 restrictions we had our first in-person event, a Halloween party at the nursing home, with music, dancing, and a costume contest. There were 35-40 people (*Table 1*) who attended the Halloween party; “the students were fabulous and made the party extra special” mentioned, the therapeutic recreation director at the Nursing and Rehabilitation Center.

In another initiative, the nursing home residents were invited to assist a yearlong class, People & Stories, offered at Drexel University College of Medicine. In People & Stories, medical students joined older adults from Philadelphia’s Northwest neighborhoods to discuss contemporary short stories that illuminate the human condition. As medical students and elders listen and talk across borders of age, culture, and perspective, the class challenged stereotypes and discovered unexpected commonalities. There were two residents who attended and

Correspondence to Victoria Stoffel
vs559@drexel.edu

Disclosure Statement: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Table 1. Data summary

Category of Activity	Number of Participants
Number of Drexel University College of Medicine Volunteers Enrolled	27 ■
Number of Nursing Home Residents Enrolled	6
Number of Letters Exchanged per pair	3
Number of Volunteers Attending Events	6*
Number of Nursing Home residents Attending Events	35-40
Drexel University College of Medicine Class "People & Stories" Nursing Home residents Attending	2

■.Number of medical students enrolled from first- and second-year medical student 2021- 2022.

*.Number of volunteers were limited due to COVID restrictions.

received certificates of participation after the completion of the class. "I really like that class. Can I participate again?" commented one of the residents. Sadly, the other resident passed. The resident's sister participated in the class with him. She said that her brother always enjoyed learning and they had planned to take a community course together, but COVID shut the program down. She was very happy to have taken the People and Stories course with her brother. She said that it was one of the last things that they did together.

In a mixed-methods study involving elderly individuals with known depression or anxiety who had demonstrated, no worsening of symptoms two months after the start of the pandemic, investigators noted that study participants appeared to withstand the influence of isolation, especially with social connectedness⁷. Through dance parties, letters, and classes we were able to bring joy to a population that the pandemic took a huge toll on. And mostly as medical students learned how gratifying and easy it can be to help someone and have seen first-hand, the impacts of establishing social connectivity with those that need it the most in challenging times. We asked medical students to rank 5 lessons they got out of the opportunity of volunteering through Growing Young. In the survey medical students ranked "sometimes people just need someone to listen" followed by "helping others is empowering" as the top two lessons learned.

Future directions include developing a depression screening test to administer before our next initiative and re-administering the screening again a year later. Our goal is to gauge the impact of Growing Young on the resident's wellbeing.

REFERENCES

1. Victor CR. Loneliness in care homes: A neglected area of research? *Aging health*. 2012;8(6):637-646. <https://doi.org/10.2217/ahe.12.65>
2. Blazer DG. Depression in late life: Review and commentary. *J Gerontol A Biol sci med sci*. 2003;58(3):249-265. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerona/58.3.M249>
3. Matos Queirós A, von Gunten A, Martins M, Wellens NIH, Verloo H. The forgotten psychopathology of depressed long-term care facility residents: A call for evidence-based practice. *Dementia and geriatric cognitive disorders extra*. 2021;11(1):38-44. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000514118>
4. Alexopoulos GS. Depression in the elderly. *Lancet*. 2005;365(9475):1961-1970. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(05\)66665-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(05)66665-2)
5. Beekman AT, Geerlings SW, Deeg DJ, et al. The natural history of late-life depression: A 6-year prospective study in the community. *Arch gen psychiatry*. 2002;59(7):605-611. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.59.7.605>
6. Chun A, Reinhardt JP, Ramirez M, et al. Depression recognition and capacity for self-report among ethnically diverse nursing homes residents: Evidence of disparities in screening. *J clin nurs*. 2017;26(23-24):4915-4926. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.13974>
7. Vahia IV, Jeste DV, Reynolds CF, III. Older adults and the mental health effects of covid-19. *JAMA*. 2020;324(22):2253-2254. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.21753>