

Peers for Productive Aging

Older adults find new ways to connect

OASIS Peers for Productive Aging helps older adults cope better with life's transitions and reconnect with their community.

One of the greatest challenges of retirement and later life is a decline in social support as older adults begin to lose touch with co-workers, friends or family.

These life transitions - such as the loss of a spouse, loss of mobility, a move to a new home, and changes in health - can trigger feelings of loss and loneliness, and result in social isolation.

This is an on-going concern for adults ages 50 and older, particularly among low income adults who may experience a greater impact on their health as a result of social isolation.

How peer groups help

Research shows that activity-based, group programs are more effective in reducing feelings of isolation.

Since 2006, OASIS has held peer-led discussion groups which have assisted people who are coping with life transitions. Through 45-60 minute sessions, volunteers impact social isolation through inclusive discussions that address emotional, spiritual and physical health.



"A lot of us don't listen to television or read the paper, so this is a way to stay up on events and have a chance to discuss issues."



"You really learn a lot and you feel closer to people when they start telling stories."

-- Nancy, 79

This program is currently offered in St. Louis, Missouri. Thanks to a grant from the AARP Foundation, OASIS is conducting additional research to establish the program as an evidence-based practice for reducing social isolation among older adults. Once this happens, the program will be disseminated across the country through the OASIS network and other organizations.

Impacting social isolation

Based on follow-up surveys in the St. Louis program, the peer-led discussion groups show a positive impact on factors associated with social isolation. Thirty-percent or more of the participants reported that they made more friends and had more friends that they saw or heard from monthly, got together with neighbors more often, and saw improvements in companionship, since starting the program.

Additionally, after participating in the program:

 Twenty-two percent of the participants found it less difficult to make friends

- The number of participants who felt that they could initiate conversation with someone who they would like to meet increased by 31%
- More than 30% of the participants felt that they would keep trying to make friends with someone who seemed hard to make friends with
- Thirty-two percent of the participants felt that they acquired their friends through their own personal abilities

On average, participants of peer-led discussion groups are 80 years old and are mostly African-American females. Nearly all participants report living alone, 91% percent had an income below \$20,000, 46% reported their health as being poor or fair, and 41% had at least one disability.

How the program works

Trained volunteers age 50+ connect low income older adult participants to resources, information and social contacts that enable them to better cope with life's transitions. Group facilitators, recruited from within the communities served, conduct regular sessions with 8-12 individuals using structured outlines on a variety of topics. These outlines allow for guided dialogue among group members to encourage open discussion. The groups create safe spaces for the sharing of knowledge and ideas.

Currently, volunteer leaders facilitate discussions from over 50 topics in rotation, including Dealing with Grief and Loss, Assertiveness, Battling Boredom,



"If you want to stay connected, if you want to meet new people, this is the place to be."

-- Minnie, 63

Compassion Fatigue, Power of Laughter and Getting a Good Night of Sleep. Participants and volunteer leaders provide feedback, and topics are updated and added.

Discussions often present opportunities for additional guest speakers or activity ideas. By working with the community, these types of programs can be offered in addition to the peer-led discussion groups and engage new participants in community activities. Peer-led discussion groups can be offered anywhere that adults gather including independent living, senior centers and faith-based communities. All that is needed for a group to be successful is a quiet place with chairs in a circle for talking and listening. Many find that refreshments provide a relaxed atmosphere.

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OASIS is a national non-profit organization that promotes successful aging through lifelong learning, health programs and volunteer engagement. The OASIS vision is to see that adults age 50-plus across the country have opportunities to pursue vibrant, healthy, productive and meaningful lives. Founded in 1982, OASIS has a national membership of more than 360,000 adults and serves 59,000 people annually through partnerships in 43 cities. The OASIS Institute in St. Louis is the national headquarters.

