

Social Connection in Life Plan Communities

The Need to Innovate

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A PERSONAL STORY

I was having lunch with my in-laws several years ago at a Life Plan Community in Virginia when I asked them the following question: **What do you like most about living here and what do you like least about living here?** They had been living at this particular community for almost seven years, long enough to have formed an opinion. This was an important question for me because I have spent the last 30 years of my professional life serving nonprofit senior living communities. I believe they do good work, and I was extremely curious to hear my in-laws' response

Sarah sat there for what seemed like several minutes, looked at her husband and said the following: "What T.C. and I like most about living here are the friends we have made and the sense of community and social connection we have. What we like the least about living here is losing those same friends to death on a routine basis. However, we would have it no other way." Looking back on that conversation we had in the Westminster Canterbury dining room with its spectacular view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, I realized the awesome power of Sarah's statement. My mother-in-law had identified two sides of the same coin. More than anything else, the value of that Life Plan Community to my wife's parents was social connection and a sense of belonging.

RECENT RESEARCH

A Harvard Study on Aging published in 2016 confirms Sarah's statement. The study identified social isolation for seniors as one of the most difficult problems our society will face in the coming years. Often misunderstood, loneliness and boredom are the biggest public health crises facing older adults. Social isolation is the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It not only affects mood, but suppresses the immune system. In fact, Great Britain has identified social isolation as a national crisis: and as a result, has established a new cabinet position – A Minister of Loneliness.

Anyone who has been following this topic can find plenty of articles and books addressing the importance of this issue. Another Harvard Study, which began in the 1930s and followed over 700 men for almost 80 years, found **the No. 1 factor to longevity, health and happiness was being in relationship with others and social connection.** The Blue Zone study completed by *National Geographic* fellow Dan Buettner identified "Blue Zones" around the world where people live longer and happier lives. In addition to diet and lifestyle,

the study identified being in social circles, being in community and being in relationship with family as key ingredients to living longer and healthier lives. And according to a 2012 study done by the *Journal of Neurology Neurosurgery and Psychiatry*, seniors who feel lonely are more than 2.5 times more likely to develop dementia.

WE ARE WIRED FOR CONNECTION

In her most recent book, "Braving the Wilderness," researcher and psychologist Brene Brown hammers the point home that as members of a social species we don't derive strength from a rugged individualism but from our collective ability to plan, communicate and work together. That's why social connection matters. Yet, we do deny our loneliness. She quotes one study in her book that found the following: living with air pollution increases your odds of dying early by 5%; living with obesity, 20%; excessive drinking, 30%. And living with loneliness? It increases our odds of dying early by 45%

Social isolation is defined as "a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts and is deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships." Unfortunately, aging increases the likelihood of living alone in social isolation. According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) 11 million, over one in four people aged 65 and older lived alone in 2010, and that number will grow as the population ages.

THE CHALLENGE

Although senior living communities have the opportunity to address the issue of social isolation, many are failing to do so. For many senior living communities, the problem is right in front of us, yet we fool ourselves into thinking we have solved it by building a lovely community with numerous activities. And just living next to others is not the same as true connection or engagement. A startling finding is that 50% of residents who live in senior living community settings suffer from some form of social isolation.

The following is a true story that illustrates how blind our industry is to this issue. I recently attended a planning meeting for a new start-up senior living community touting itself as "a community focusing on wellness." At the meeting were land planners, architects, accountants, marketing consultants, marketing researchers, engineers, and retired and current executives from nonprofit providers. Everyone was excited this new community would be integrated into a larger mixed-use development and

would use population health management, an integrated wellness model, wellness gatekeepers and other tools to create a Life Plan Community focused on wellness.

However, no one brought up social connection and engagement.

When it was finally mentioned, everyone agreed social connection should be an integral part of the programming and it should be identified as a differentiator for this particular community. This is a planned community that quite frankly, has most of the ingredients to address social engagement head on, but for some reason, no one seemed to grasp its importance or knew how to communicate it or describe it.

So, given the importance of social connection and being in community, we need to ensure Life Plan Communities are addressing this pressing need. Innovation in programming, design, technology and even nomenclature are of upmost importance in addressing social isolation in our communities.

A CASE STUDY – ONE COMMUNITY'S INITIATIVE

Westminster Canterbury on Chesapeake Bay (W-C Bay) in Virginia Beach, Virginia, is declaring war on the issue of social isolation within community through its new and innovative Birdsong Tablet. The tablets are in-room, personalized, simple-to-operate touch-screens available 24/7. The tablets connect all minds, especially those with cognitive limitations, to ideas, entertainment and people. The tablets are preloaded with hundreds of hours of videos, music, movies, classic TV shows, games and educational content. They include simple-to-use video chat, email and photo sharing tools.

George and Sue Birdsong, now residents, saw the enormous potential of content rich, dementia friendly tablets installed in every room and decided to graciously fund an academic study at W-C Bay. The goal was to prove whether the use of bedside digital engagement tools really make life better for those in assisted living and nursing care.

Residents in assisted living and nursing are at-risk for social isolation or boredom because no senior living community has enough human capital to engage and entertain these residents 24/7. Although employees may not be able to meet these needs, technology can. Touchscreens can be used to quickly access content and activities of interest, whenever the resident is ready to connect.

The studies showed it worked. As compared with residents who did not have digital engagement tools, those with simple touchscreen computers saw a 55% decrease in depression on the Geriatric Depression Scale and a 14% improvement in quality of life as measured by the Affect Balance Scale

One surprise was the impact on staff. Leadership initially feared staff would want more resources because of the anticipated burden of helping residents use the simple computers. Instead, the aides found the machines were easy to operate and not much prompting was needed

Surprisingly, when the study moved to a new control group, the nursing staff demanded the devices back! **The devices not only benefitted the residents, but the device made life better for the**

caregivers. As nonprofit Life Plan Communities continue to face employee recruitment and retention issues, innovative tools like the Birdsong Tablet will make employees jobs easier and more fulfilling, making the best places to live also the best places to work as labor continues to grow scarcer.

THE COST BARRIER

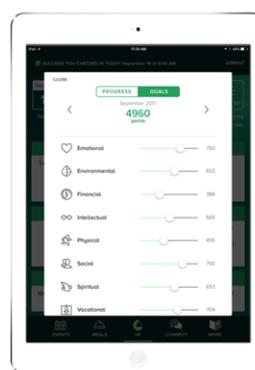
Although everyone agreed such touchscreens in every room would benefit residents **and** staff alike, the real barrier for the device was the cost. Unfortunately, U.S. vendors of digital engagement software largely ignore the dementia market. The one company that did serve those with cognitive impairment could only attract six families at the prices they charged. W-C Bay tried several group machines in hallways and nooks, but shared machines did not have the same impact.

W-C Bay concluded it had no choice but to find another partner and enter the market to spur development and innovation. As a nonprofit organization serving seniors, W-C Bay saw it as a moral obligation to bring an affordable solution to this issue, so W-C Bay turned to a company in France that made bedside hospital info/tainment tablets: TMM Groupe, which modified its software to W-C Bay's specifications.

Integrating technology already developed by TMM, **W-C Bay was able to get the monthly cost down from \$111 per month to \$18 per room per month!** As a result of making these bedside digital tools much more affordable, they are ready for widespread adoption. Thus far, seven other communities have ordered tablets. As a result of W-C Bay's dogged determination to not give up on this initiative, bedside digital engagement is now less expensive than group cable TV.

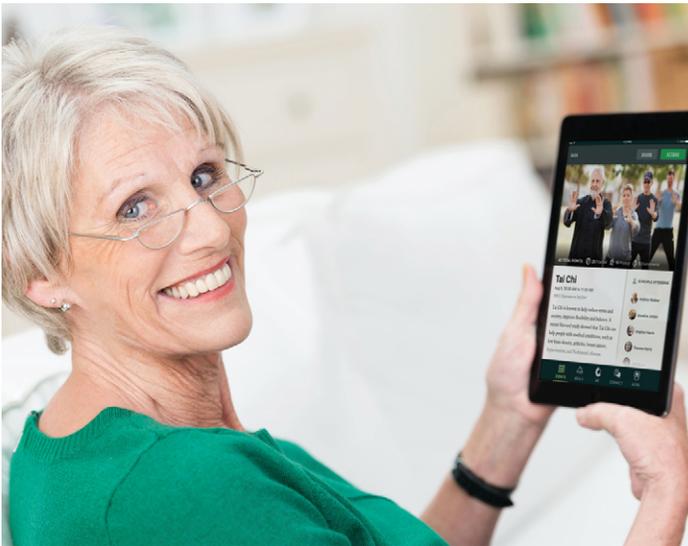
The tablets are now widely used and embraced by both residents and staff. Families like the ease of virtual visits and communication, especially those families who are far away. One centenarian met her new great, great grandson in London through a live video call. Because families are remaining more connected, they have more to talk about and in-person visits are more engaging.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO CREATING CONNECTION IN THE GREATER COMMUNITY



In addition to using technology to reduce social isolation in assisted living and skilled nursing, technology platforms are available to reduce social isolation and improve social wellness in the greater community. One such platform is Wellzesta Life, a platform now being used by several nonprofit communities to increase holistic wellness and social integration by using data to measure and monitor factors such as mood, engagement and satisfaction.

If Life Plan Communities do embrace social wellness as an integral part of their value proposition, conventional data-gathering methods including resident feedback surveys provide limited insight into the



social wellness of residents. To truly obtain real-time data that could improve social wellness and preempt social isolation, Wellzesta Life creates an “Electronic Wellness Record” that provides measurable real time data of the social connectedness and social interactions of users, **thus equipping staff with the tools to proactively reach out to residents twho may be identified as “at risk” for social isolation.** Through this platform, Life Plan Communities can influence social wellness in three ways: (1) increase overall social engagement through strategies proven to be effective with measurable data and outcomes; (2) equip staff with the tools needed to identify and pre-empt social isolation; (3) create objective criteria to measure and communicate the social wellness benefits of moving to a Life Plan Community to prospective residents. As one CEO of a nonprofit community in North Carolina states, “By adopting Wellzesta Life, Aldersgate saw an opportunity to lead the industry and position our community as the premiere provider of wellness for elders in Charlotte, N.C. We are seeing big dividends.”

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT FOSTERS CONNECTION

The above examples demonstrate commitment to making a real difference in the fight against social isolation, but we need to go further. Going back to Brene Brown’s book, “Braving the Wilderness,” places and spaces can hold feelings of disconnection. Sometimes a place can feel lonely because of some sense of lack of closeness and the relationships that are not happening in that space. In fact, the paradox is a person can feel more lonely and isolated around others than when they are alone. Each of us has experienced that at some point. Who would believe a dining room could create a feeling of disconnection? RiverWoods Exeter in New Hampshire did.

RiverWoods Exeter formed an Innovation Committee, made up mostly of residents to identify problems and innovative ways to tackle those problems, often using technology. Because many residents suffer from hearing loss, the committee identified that dining rooms, with their chatter, made it difficult for people with hearing loss to be engaged. Because people were having a hard time hearing each other, residents were becoming disengaged from conversations and more socially isolated. The Committee worked

a company called Shanahand Sound to identify solutions, which eventually led to using Contacta Tables, which use “inductive loop technology,” making it easier for residents to hear each other and connect. By using an innovative approach and solution to reduce social isolation in its community, RiverWoods Exeter won the Innovation Award at the most recent Leading Age Maine-New Hampshire conference. This simple, but innovative initiative made the dining room more welcoming, and as a result, made it a space that no longer isolated people.

At this point, it would be easy to focus on RiverWoods Exeter’s impact on the residents who directly benefited from the dining room initiative, but what is **equally if not more important is the impact the initiative had on the residents who were involved in the solution.** I attended the ceremony during which RiverWoods residents accepted the award, and you could tell they were very engaged! A recent “Wall Street Journal” article on social isolation mentions “the most compelling strategy to tackle loneliness in older populations is providing opportunities to volunteer and serve others.” This is often referred to as “purposeful social interaction” and could be called “Life on Purpose.” The article goes on to say it is especially beneficial to older populations who have the opportunity to volunteer and serve young people. Older adults have talents and life experiences to share, and young people can benefit from their support.

I was recently visiting a nonprofit organization in Boston that provides low-income housing for seniors. One of their innovative programs encourages their residents to act as foster grandparents to children in the communities where they operate. In speaking to the organization’s CFO, she reported the program not only greatly benefits the children being served but also the residents who are serving. And this was coming from the CFO!

A federally funded Foster Grandparents program determined that most active participants reported almost never feeling lonely, unlike those on the waiting list to join the program. Life Plan Communities need to find innovative ways to enable their residents to improve the lives of younger people who can benefit from their service. This not only improves the quality of the lives of residents, but as a nonprofit, mission-oriented organization, nonprofit Life Plan Communities can expand their missions to serve the greater community. Think about it. Your future residents will likely want social interaction outside of your community’s walls and, in particular, will want meaningful intergenerational connections.

THE MANDATE

It is imperative for senior executives and board members of nonprofit Life Plan Communities to recognize providing social engagement may be their organization’s primary value proposition. Promoting “social engagement and being in community” in your mission statement and ensuring these concepts are a part of your DNA are vital, and they need to be intentional.

As Dan Buettner says in his book “Blue Zones Solution,” a necessary strategy is “to focus on environment instead of individual behavior

change” as a way to get people to live longer, healthier and happier lives. Common factors your community can promote that the Blue Zone study found contributed to longevity include: investing in family; being part of a faith-based community; being a part of social circles that support healthy behaviors; establishing routines that shed stress; creating a sense of purpose by serving, and, finally, living in environments that encourage moving, especially walking. The Birdsong Tablet initiative, the Wellzesta Life platform, inductive loop technology and establishing intergenerational programs focus on environment, making social connection more available to everyone.

It’s been several years since that dining room conversation with my wife’s parents. My father-in-law, who I love and respect dearly, now has some severe health issues and he has been going back and forth between independent living and health care. I visited him while he was recuperating in health care and he looked bored, and although a very nonplussed individual, I could tell he desperately wanted social connection. That moment underscores “that what makes us truly human is our connection with each other.”

As you think about how your organization can impact more lives, will you strive to provide an environment that creates more social connection, thus creating a healthier and happier lifestyle, or will you continue to be focused on the individual and, in particular, only the people within your walls? It starts with naming it and owning it. As a part of your culture, will you adopt language and nomenclature that addresses social engagement directly or will you ignore this important need. What innovative strategy will you pursue to change your community’s environment to promote not just a longer life, but a happier and healthier life? Many of our customer’s may not even know how to express the desire of belonging and social connection, but is what our customers desperately want.

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