



# Cultural awareness

## SOCIAL ISOLATION

This evidence theme on cultural awareness is a summary of one of the key topics identified by a scoping review of the social isolation research.

### Key points

- Cultural awareness is the understanding and sensitivity to the values, beliefs, customs, and traditions of different cultures.
- Older adults from diverse cultural backgrounds experience unique challenges contributing to social isolation.
- Culture shapes an individual's relationship attitudes, and misunderstandings stemming from these differences can contribute to loneliness and social isolation.
- Coping strategies can include maintaining relationships with family, friends, and neighbours, engaging in social activities, and accessing institutional support.

### What is cultural awareness?

Culture refers to the shared beliefs, practices, traditions, languages, and values that are characteristic of a particular group of people or society. [1] It encompasses the way of life, social norms, and learned behaviours that are passed down from one generation to the next, shaping the identity and interactions of people. [1] Cultural awareness means understanding different cultures and how that shapes a perspective. [2]

Cultural awareness is increasingly important in our interconnected world as we witness a rise in cultural diversity driven by travel, migration, and intercultural marriages. [3] This has led to an increase in the number of older people with diverse cultural backgrounds. [3] Older people from various cultural backgrounds may face challenges stemming from wider social norms and issues, such as adapting to new languages, living conditions, and family changes, potentially lacking social support. [3, 4] These situations can lead to experiences of discrimination and loneliness, resulting in isolation and significant health consequences. [3, 5]

Cultural differences also impact how people act and interpret social behaviour. [6] Varying values in personal relationships, such as greetings and expressions of affection, can lead to misunderstandings. [6] For example, what is seen as friendly in one culture may be perceived differently in another. [6] Some cultures prioritise collective harmony, while others emphasise individual autonomy. [6] These distinctions can result in potential misinterpretations during interactions, affecting the quality of connections and contributing to loneliness and social isolation. [6]

## What do we know about cultural awareness in older people?

We found two reviews that reported on the experiences and factors contributing to social isolation among older people with diverse cultural backgrounds within community settings. [3]

The first review found that older Chinese adults faced isolation and loneliness as they encountered insufficient social connections, the loss of familiar cultural environments, and a lack of recreational and physical activities. [3] Immigrating and living in a country with different cultures and practices led to changes in family lifestyles (i.e. Chinese cultural expectations), prompting new adjustments within the family structure. [3] Such circumstances often led to strained intergenerational relationships that exacerbate isolation and loneliness. [3] Additionally, limited English proficiency hindered their ability to socialise with neighbours and access essential social and healthcare services. [3]

The review found that older Chinese adults were motivated to develop strategies to overcome isolation by engaging in gardening and artwork. [3] Gardening was also practiced collectively with the family (i.e. children) as a strategy to reduce tension and improve relationships. [3]

The second review found that older Asian adults encountered unique challenges during their lifetime, including cultural barriers, socioeconomic burden, and mistreatment and abuse, all of which played a role in their experiences of isolation as they grew older. [7] The review also found that the loss of social support was linked to feelings of disconnection and abandonment due to the death of family and friends, as well as an absence of a suitable organisational support system. [7]

Older Asian adults described their feelings of isolation and loneliness using words such as “empty”, “suffocated”, “painful”, “helpless”, “angry”, and “frustrating”. [7] Some older Asian adults coped with these feelings by sleeping excessively or by simply trying to get through each day. [7] There were a minority of older Asian adults who were motivated to cope by sustaining harmonious relationships with their family, friends, and neighbours through regular face-to-face meetings or virtual platforms (i.e. Skype, Facebook, Whatsapp, phone calls). [7]

Other coping strategies included attending religious activities, cognitive resilience, physical independence, acceptance of situations, having walks, schedule social engagement activities (i.e. window shopping, watching films, volunteering, engaging in hobbies), and seeking for community and institutional support. [7]

## What can an individual do?

- Facilitate and assist regular face-to-face meetings or virtual interactions with family, friends, and neighbours.
- Encourage older people to actively participate in social activities and engage with others in the community. This can include joining clubs, attending social events, volunteering, or participating in group hobbies or interests.
- Assisting older people to access institutional support and healthcare services that can provide valuable assistance in dealing with isolation and related challenges.

## What can an organisation do?

- Design physical spaces and environments that are welcoming and accessible to older adults with different cultural needs. Consider factors like language access, cultural representation, and the availability of culturally relevant materials and resources.
- Ensure that age care services are culturally competent and accessible to older adults, addressing any language or cultural barriers that may exist in healthcare settings.
- Collaborate with community organisations, cultural centres, and religious institutions to create a network of support for older adults. These partnerships can help identify and reach out to isolated individuals.

## Limitations

This evidence theme has been informed by the results of a rapid scoping review intended to map the current published research in this area. We acknowledge that our findings reflect on the evidence available and that this evidence varies in quality.

Moreover, the review included studies that reported on limited geographical regions and multicultural societies, which may not be generalisable to some cultures and belief systems.

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