Addressing the Many Costs of Social Isolation

By Jana Eisenberg

The study, says Bakk, is an opportunity to examine social isolation and its outcomes in older adults, especially since she observes isolation is already a major global concern. And as part of the research, the current pandemic is helping to bring it closer.

Social isolation is the result of a wide range of factors, including age, socioeconomic status, health, and living arrangements. It can have negative consequences for mental and physical health, and it is increasingly recognized as a public health issue.

A 2020 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report found that more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older consider themselves socially isolated.

In 2015, when the AASWSW added “eradicate social isolation” to its mission statement, its 25,000 members around the world immediately recognized the importance of the issue.

Social isolation is a silent killer—as dangerous to health as smoking. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

Addressing the Many Costs of Social Isolation

The social work profession is working on how to approach the issue from intervention and practice viewpoints. We—as a society, as social workers, as friends, and family—can help to prevent and reduce social isolation by finding ways to address it.

A 2020 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report found that people who felt strongly connected to others had lower levels of social isolation and better physical and mental health outcomes.

According to the report, social isolation is not just a problem for older adults. It affects people of all ages and can have a significant impact on health and well-being.

More older adults are choosing to live alone, which is increasing the need for interventions to help them stay connected to others.

Virtual reality (VR) is one technology that is being explored as a way to help older adults overcome social isolation. VR allows users to experience virtual environments, which can simulate social interactions and provide opportunities for social connections.

UB School of Social Work Professor Louanne Bakk is leading a study that will use VR to help older adults with social isolation. The study will work with older people living in their own homes, a new approach for social work.

The experiences you can have are so meaningful, she said. The opportunity to go to places you might not be able to go, or talk to each other while you are in the same environment with other people.

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A Study to Connect Through Virtual Reality

"People experiencing social isolation exhibit more adverse health effects—dizzy spells, the depressed lung, the increased blood pressure, the increased diastolic, the CVS dips," she said. "Some start to neglect themselves, and even one to move to a care facility because the care is so unkind, lonely, and alone.""The experiences you can have are so far-ranging," said Bakk. "You can take a group to a concert or a museum, where they can share the experience and talk about what they're doing. They can see it together, learn together, get to know one another. It's a wonderful experience that we share memories." It makes us feel vital; a 'part of.'"

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Virtual Interprofessional Forum a Success

With Office Of Students And Faculty, The School Of Social Work Participated In Annual Fall Forum Hosted By The Office of Interprofessional Education (OIE). This Year It Was Successfully Held Online. A Total Of 80 Students And The Faculty Participated In The Daylong Event, With Small Group Sessions That Allowed Students Who Participated In The Forum To Learn More About Other Disciplines' Contributions To Various Fields. The Featured Speaker Was Erie County Health Commissioner Gail Burckel, Who Spoke About The Importance Of Interprofessional Collaboration In Health Care. Attendees Had The Opportunity To Network With Other Students And Learn More About The Benefits Of Interprofessional Practice.

Nancy J. Smyth

Dean Nancy J. Smyth

As a school, we welcome fresh leadership to continue the work we have done to keep the school moving forward with excellence, innovation, and equity. (For a brief Q&A with Dean Smyth about her plans for the future, see p. )

Although it is with pride that we announce new leaders in our leadership, we commit to carrying forward the traditions and collaboration of so many of you. It is my firm belief that leadership begins on the cover.

It's still in an abbreviated format, the content reflects our work—the committed and supportive alumni, community and friends. While we have done to keep the school moving forward with excellence, innovation, and equity. (For a brief Q&A with Dean Smyth about her plans for the future, see p. )

As usual, it is with pride that we present Mosaics to you, our committed and supportive alumni, community and friends. While it's still in an abbreviated format, the content reflects our work—the projects you've launched, the connections you've made, and the impact you've had on the field. We are thrilled to have her return to her role as a faculty member and contributing scholar, and in the future-forward environments?"}

Shatorah Donovan, JD '12, MSW '11, BA '07

This summer she'll work with an interdisciplinary team of students as they fulfill their short-term projects. Shatorah Donovan's responsibilities include elevating individuals and community with intention—as ideal:

Working with various city departments, she's learned more about the importance of collaboration and the impact of policy. This experience has reinforced her belief in the power of transdisciplinary collaboration, where professionals from different fields work together to address complex challenges. Donovan believes that real-life results mean a lot to her too. The greatest recognition is when someone says, "What you did made a difference in my life," she said.

First for its annual Inclusion Diversity Equity Awareness (IDEA) Awards. She is pleased with the acknowledgement, but notes that it's still in an abbreviated format, the content reflects our work—the committed and supportive alumni, community and friends. While we have done to keep the school moving forward with excellence, innovation, and equity. (For a brief Q&A with Dean Smyth about her plans for the future, see p. )

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Creating solutions for the future.

codified—every social worker has the potential to be a leader in and collaboration of so many of you. It is my firm belief that the ‘triple pandemic’—and we are pleased to offer a brief story about one of our alumna; she is active in the important isolation, particularly in older adults, was one of them. Many cracks in our society. The challenges presented by social innovation, and equity.

For a brief Q&A with Dean Smyth about what we have done to keep the school moving forward with excellence, we thank you. As a school, we welcome fresh leadership to continue the work of our predecessor's groundwork. Nancy J. Smyth, our new Vice Dean/Chief of Staff, will sequence directly into a sabbatical, another commonplace event in a working academic's life—a year off to refresh, regroup, and rebuild one's next area of focus (in Smyth’s 30+ years at UB, she’s taken exactly 2 months off, but this will be her first sabbatical). Smyth took over this position, that’s about what it takes to accomplish what Cathy put in place. Smyth is doing it well, and her predecessor’s groundwork is substantial.

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Smyth’s role as Dean encompasses the College of Social Work, the School of Social Work, and various related centers and programs. She is responsible for overseeing faculty and staff, ensuring the delivery of high-quality education and research, and fostering a culture of excellence.

“FAREWELL BUT NOT GOODBYE, Nancy J. Smyth”

Design: iDesign, Joseph Galanti

Address changes and other correspondence can be sent to socialwork@buffalo.edu. For an electronic version of this publication, visit socialwork.buffalo.edu/mosaics.
In academia, deans of schools regularly move in and out of their crucial positions, such changes are part of keeping a school administration healthy and functional. Our dean for over 16 years, Nancy J. Smyth, is doing just that now, wrapping up her time in the position she has occupied so capably. She will segue directly into a sabbatical, another commonplace event in a working academic’s life—a year off to refresh, regroup, and rebuild one’s next area of focus (in Smyth’s 30+ years of UB, she’s taken exactly one). We are thrilled to have her return to her role as a faculty member and contributing scholar, and in the meantime, say thank you for your service, well deserved, and we’ll see you when you get back!

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Why are you stepping down now?

My passion is for creating and building things—the school is doing well now, my goal is to leave on a high note. Deans spend on average 6–7 years in the position, that’s about what it takes to accomplish your goals. By that measure, I’ve enjoyed a long time, and I want to make sure I don’t overstay my effectiveness.

What plans do you have?

I haven’t figured it all out yet, it’s been a hard year to get much thinking time. I’d do a little decompressing, but I’ll get bored if I don’t move on! I’m looking forward to being colleagues with faculty again. As I clean out my office, and plan for my sabbatical, I am asking myself what I want to do longer-term. I do want to mentor, teach, learn and participate in service, which you can’t do as much of as dean. My interests have shifted from my past focus on trauma and addiction, to larger professional leadership issues; such as how social work prepares and shapes the future. This can include working across disciplines in a way that transcends their natural boundaries; the scholarly term for it is “transdisciplinarity.” As part of this, I’m focused on social innovation and technology for social good, including ensuring that technology promotes justice and equity.

Is there a roadmap for the next dean?

The path has been defined towards excellence, the next logic is: what’s the next person brings. I hope they work with all stakeholders to build on the vision and shape the future of the profession and our society. And racial justice and equity need to be an important piece of what anyone does in social work right now.

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Cover story, continued

to see if VR can help to decrease those
and alone. “Some start to neglect themselves,
more physical and pain complaints,
People experiencing social isolation
especially since she observes isolation
Tooley is excited about the study,
Independently for Elders) Program. ”

Bakk continued. “It is now funded
and physical health and well-being, so
enlightening—it gave a sense of
said Bakk. “The experience was so
interested in VR through the DSW

A Study to Connect Through
VR

incorporating it is to help students
their own homes, a new approach for

Rendever.

a spouse, or their friends have passed
directly, negatively impacted by social
social worker who sees her clients
memories. “

sensations and allows them to share
childhood neighborhood! This creates
The experiences you can have are so

improve mental health—and it does
been shown to reduce loneliness and
living communities. It has initially

elders as embedded resources for

needs to be addressed. “The additional
issue has farther-reaching impacts
emphasized in the 1950s and 1960s,
“eradicate social isolation” to its
viewpoints. We—as a society,

isolation. The social work profession
their feelings and experiences of
are not well-positioned to mitigate
challenging. Many older adults

Connecting has become more

from the website of the Grand Challenges for Social Work, the flagship program of the

is to educate the public on this health hazard, encourage health and human

addressing the many costs

Social isolation is a silent killer—as dangerous to health as smoking. National

Addressing the Many Costs

of Social Isolation

March Themes

Social Workers Are Essential, a
living all the time, and especially now, with
the heightened awareness and experience of
the current pandemic, in which older adults were

Many older adults are isolated,

An intervention that was already

and services, it’s important to come up

aging population will need more care

over the next 30 years, more and more people in this

the issue has farther-reaching impacts

people are a “goldmine”—a mother

It makes us feel vital; a ‘part of.’”

during our appointments was enough

can dwindle vastly. I came to realize

on or moved away; social opportunities

In addition, said Laughlin, older

as art therapists; some have

as a treatment goal, “said Laughlin.

are situations that practitioners are

observing, and solutions that they

are for older adults. So we’re

of interaction.

As a problem until the 19th century

Loneliness wasn’t even defined

in past decades. In the medical

and videoconferencing. Via these

An artist, or loved to play tennis—is part

of a treatment goal, “said Laughlin.

UB SSW Alums Celebrate SW Month

This year’s national Social Work Month

March theme, “Social Workers Are Essential,

is filling all the time, and especially now, with

Social Work Month is fitting all the time, and especially now, with

UBSSW—has also risen within social work

education and practice; UBSSW—

all our DSW students purchase a

technology that input from

in the subject, and partly out of

and partly out of

Hello!

Class Notes are Now Online

Read all about your fellow alumni and what they are up to these days.
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Spring 2021