

Why talk about loneliness?
What is the impact of loneliness on a person's health?

I used to love listening to my grandma tell stories about her life. Things were so different back then! In one story, when she was just a young child, there wasn't a school nearby. Her father was quite concerned that she wouldn't have access to an education and came up with a solution. There was a school near some of their relatives, so she was sent away to live with them for a while. Problem solved, right? Not exactly. She was lonelier than she had ever been or would ever be in her life. She said that her aunt, uncle, and cousin were nice to her, but "I just missed my family – mom, dad, and siblings so much." To try to convey how deep her loneliness was, she would say, "Loneliness is worse than a disease." That has stuck with me all these years.

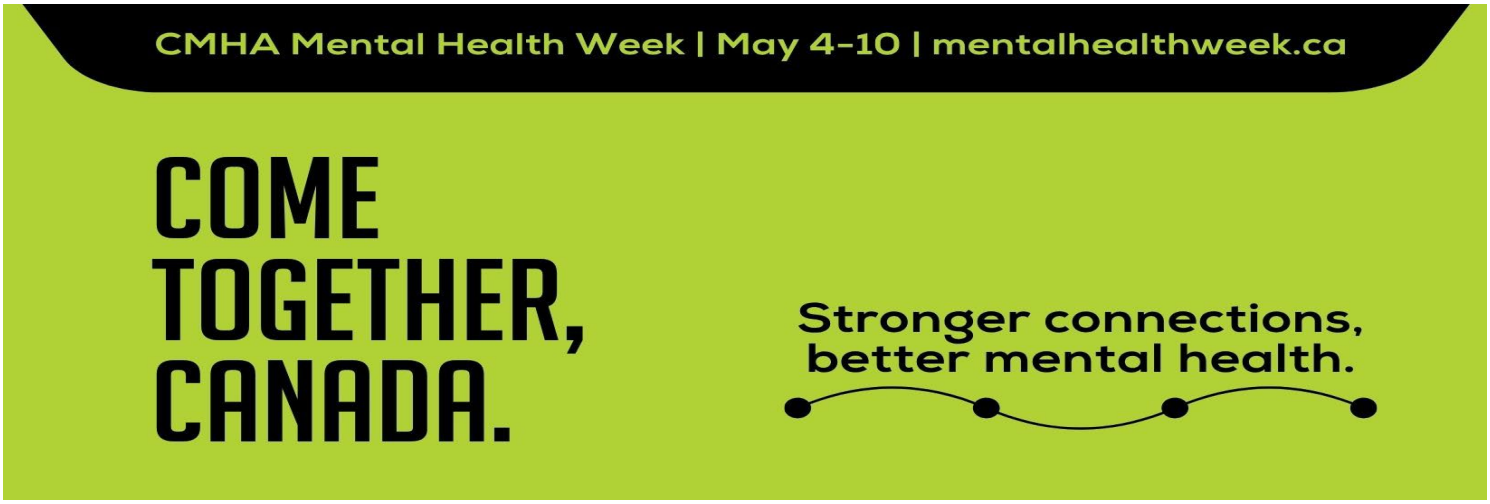
I think my grandma would be very surprised, or perhaps not, to learn that medical science has now proven that loneliness and social isolation are, in fact, related to our health, in some pretty big ways.

Health risks linked to loneliness include:

- Depressive symptoms
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease (29% increased risk)
- Stroke (32% increased risk)

* Faster aging and decline
* Self-harm
* Heightened inflammation
* Early death (due to any of above)

(Source: CMHA Mental Health Fact Sheet 2026: The Science)

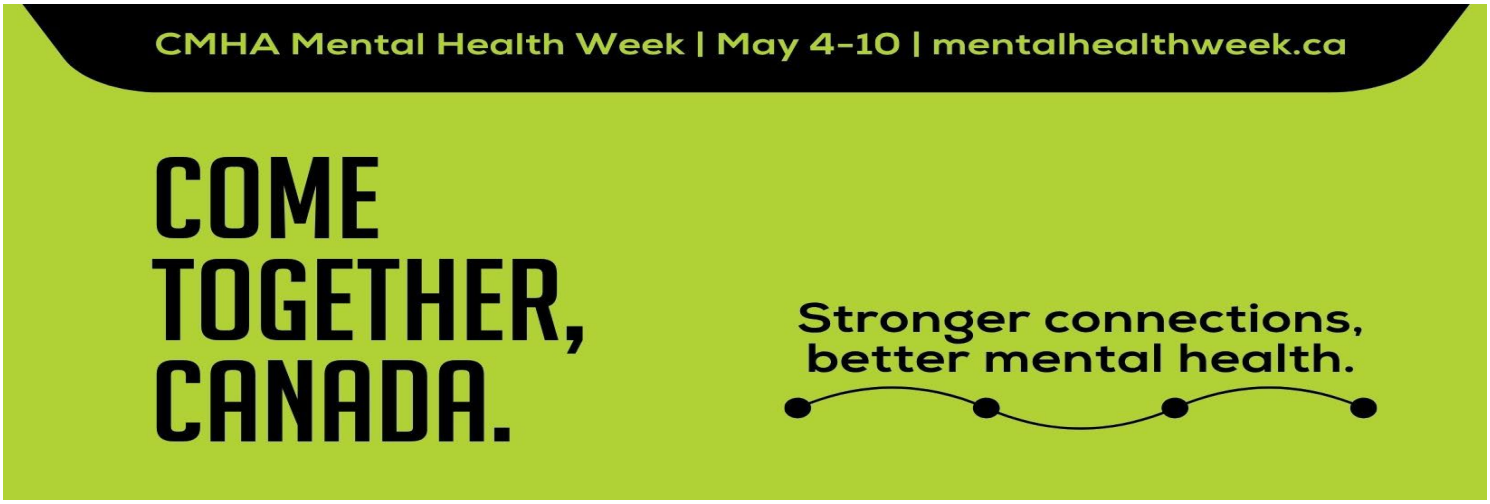


Mental Health Awareness Week (May 4-10) invited us to strengthen connections to support mental well-being with their campaign, "Come Together Canada: Stronger connections, better mental health." They highlighted that although loneliness can affect anyone, older adults and youth report the highest rates of loneliness in Canada. And, people with low income, disabilities, mental health-related concerns, or substance use and addiction challenges are at an even higher risk. *(CMHA Mental Health Week Fact Sheet 2026: Fast Facts)*

Let No One Be Alone Week (May 3-9) carried the same message of connection and suggested simple things that we can do, like: Check in on someone who may be feeling alone, invite someone for coffee or a visit, call someone you haven't spoken to for a while, go for a walk with a neighbour or friend, bring someone along to a community event, or send a card, message or small gesture of kindness.

"When we reach out to others, we're not just brightening someone else's day, we're enriching our own as well." (AF Connections, MASC, Issue 8, April 2026)

Mental Health Awareness Week and Let No One Be Alone week are now past, **BUT** connecting with others and strengthening our own connections are important all year round.



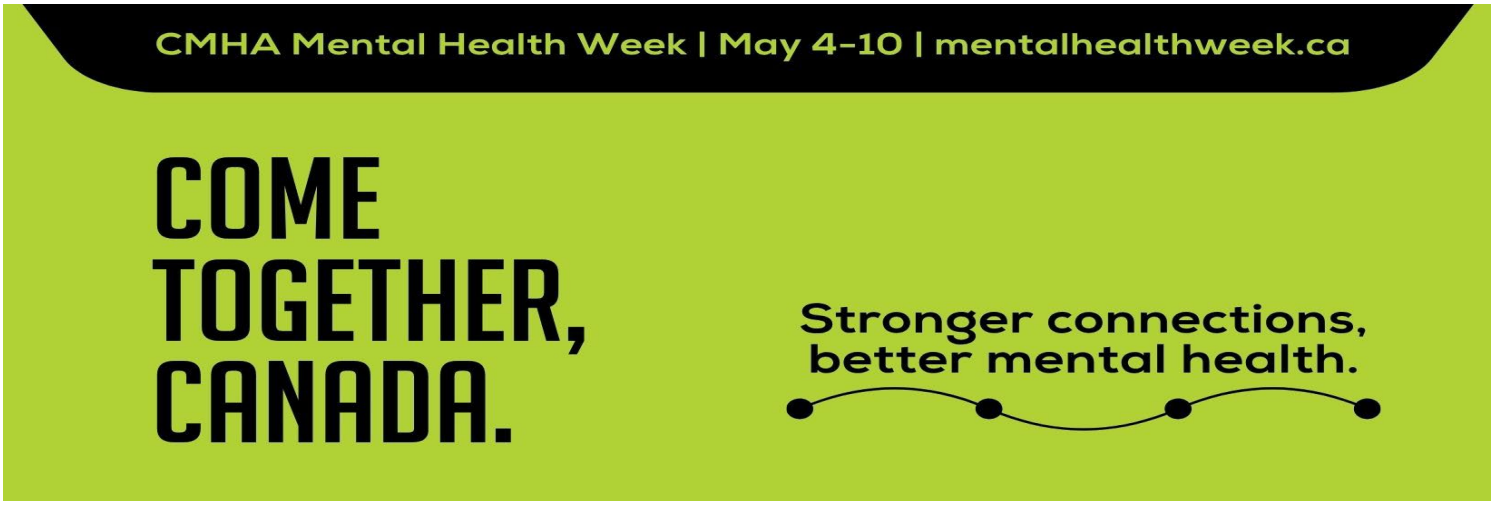
Here are some resources available to residents in the Interlake-Eastern region:

- **Social prescribing** connects older adults with their local seniors' resource coordinator to access a variety of programs and services that support independent living and social connection. For example, seniors' resource coordinators can help you find out what is offered in your community, such as seniors' exercise programs, meal programs, transportation, and recreational opportunities. Contact your local **Seniors Resource Council** for more information.

- **Adult day programs** offer older adults an opportunity to connect socially while enjoying recreational activities away from home. Programming is designed for fun, fitness, and social activity. These programs strengthen people's ability to function within their own home by preventing physical and mental deterioration, which so often results from social isolation and loneliness. Talk to your local home care case coordinator to find out how you can be referred to the program, or contact a program near you. A small fee covers transportation to and from the program, a nutritious lunch, and all activities.

Additional resources:

- **The Friendly Calls program** (Canadian Red Cross) matches anyone over the age of 18 in Canada with trained Red Cross personnel who check in regularly with a free, friendly phone call. They believe that everyone deserves to benefit from the power of human connection, no matter where they live.



- **Senior Centre Without Walls** (Age & Opportunity) provides free, fun, interactive programming over the phone! Topics include educational presentations, health and wellness, book clubs, travelogues, trivia and bingo. Open to anyone living in Manitoba over 55.

- **Social Isolation – Are you at risk?** (McMaster Optimal Aging Portal) Take this 20-minute online learning module to learn how social isolation impacts your health and practical ways to become more engaged, such as joining a group exercise program like a walking club. Physical activity can reduce feelings of loneliness by releasing "feel-good" hormones, and the nature of a group program can improve social confidence and connectedness.

These are just some of the many resources available; there are many more. Social connection can mean different things for different people. It can mean going for coffee with a coffee group, calling a friend, or volunteering in your community.

Whether it's Mental Health Awareness Week or not, social connection is a powerful tool for our mental and physical health. Reaching out to others can be the best thing we do for ourselves... and for others. *Stay well, stay connected.*

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IERHA Healthy Living - Health Promotion

Interlake-Eastern Regional Health Authority

If you or someone you know is experiencing mental health concerns, please visit our IERHA mental health program page for information, support, and resources: *Mental Health & Addictions*